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THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy & Science Fiction

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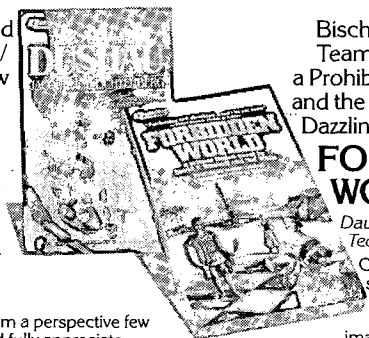

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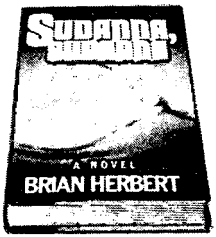

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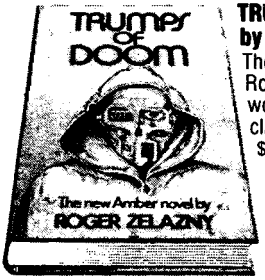

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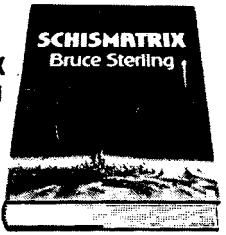

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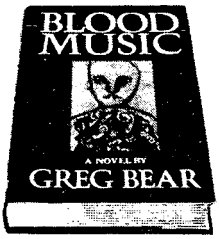

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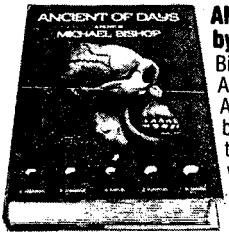

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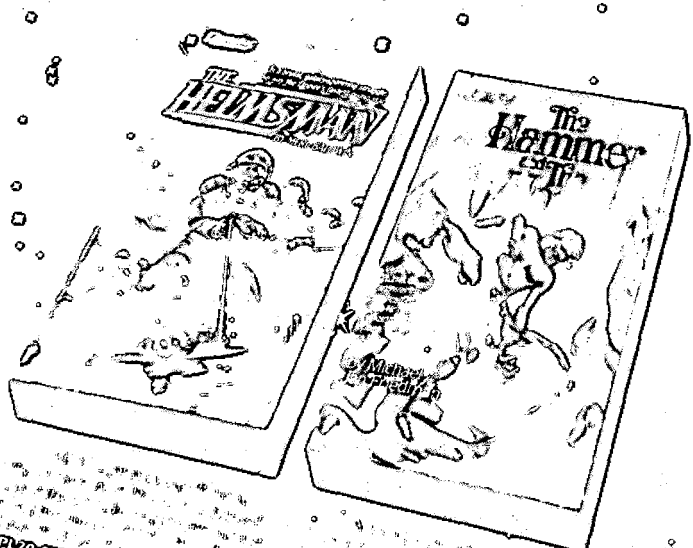

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Damon Knight, whose novel, CV, was serialized here in the January-March issues, returns with a compressed short about the ultimate merger: between electronics and religion...

The God Machine

BY
DAMON KNIGHT

Not a good morning. Bunny is on the rampage again. Three people in the Art Department are out with AIDS. Heavy smog. At ten o'clock Terry is called in to Olly's office. Terry is the creative director. Olly is the president. Handlebar mustache, striped T-shirt, Adidas. Beside Olly's desk sits a little man with a suitcase in his lap. Plastic suitcase. Undistinguished haircut.

"Terry," says Olly, "I want you to meet Bill Sonntag. He's here to show us the marketing miracle of 1985. The client is Universal Electric. They want a presentation for a thirty-mil all media campaign starting in September."

"What is the product, Bill?" Terry inquires.

"It's, like, God in a box," says Bill.

"How's that for a slogan?" asks Olly, popping a pill. "Not bad, eh, Terry?"

"Terrific, just terrific, Olly. What does it do?"

"I'm going to let Bill explain that. Take him back to your office — and Terry, lock your door."

They go to Terry's office. Terry moves a teddy bear to make room for Bill to sit down. "What is your position with U.E., Bill?" he asks.

"I'm not with them, I'm the inventor. One of the inventors. They sent me because nobody else seems to be able to explain it."

Terry nods several times. "Excuse me." He takes two aspirin. "Well, so it's God in a box? What does that mean, exactly?"

"O.K.," says Bill. "The basic idea is, is that God is immanent in certain objects — like, for instance, the best example is the Ark of the covenant. I don't know if you're familiar with the story of Uzzah, in the Second Book of Samuel?"

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"Remind me."

"Maybe I better start farther back? See, the Ark was like a box made of wood, about four feet by two by two. It was supposed to have the tablets of the Law in it — you know, the ones that God gave to Moses."

"Oh, yeah."

"You saw the movie, right? O.K., that makes it a little easier. Well, the story goes, they're moving the Ark in a cart, and this Uzzah sees it's about to tip over, so he puts his hand on it, like to steady it? And he gets a charge of something that kills him."

"This box is something that kills people, Bill?" Terry asks. He takes two more aspirin.

"No, no, that's only if you get too big a jolt. Like electricity? Anyway, what got us thinking, it says in the Bible the Ark was covered inside and out with gold. Now there could be two reasons for that. One, gold is a precious metal, O.K.?"

"You're right there, Bill. What's the other reason?"

"The other reason is—" Bill leans forward confidentially — "gold is a good conductor. Not just a good conductor, a *great* conductor. So we said, What if there *is* something in holy objects that could be electronically enhanced, or, you know, throttled down if it's too strong? The first thing we tried was a really old set of the scrolls, the Torah. Bingo. Furthermore, we found out you can transfer this power by leaving your holy object in a lead-lined container with some other object. For a relic, like a piece of bone, say we use bone. Lamb is the best."

"That's unbelievable, Bill."

"I know. That's the problem. All I can do is, is I can let you try yourself. May I ask what your religion is, Terry?"

"I'm a Presbyterian."

"O.K, you get the Protestant model. For that, we had to go to old Bibles — we bought a Gutenberg, and maybe you think that didn't cost. We found out later the Wycliffe is just as good." Bill is taking a small black box out of the suitcase. He lays it on the desk, and Terry looks at it. On the left is a dial, and on the right, inset in the box, a disk of some off-white material. Bill plugs it in; a red light comes on.

"Now what you do is, is you just relax and put your fingers on this ceramic plate, and then slowly turn up the gain. This is a low-immanence circuit, so you don't have to worry. Go ahead."

Terry does as he is told. The ceramic plate is cool and slick under his fingers. He turns the dial with his other hand. "I don't feel a thing."

"You got it all the way up? That's funny." Bill pulls the box toward him. "Let's try the theometer." He takes a bright little instrument from among the ballpoint pens in his shirt pocket, lays it across the ceramic plate. The digital readout stays at "0".

"Dead," says Bill. He opens the

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case and peers inside. "O.K., here's the trouble — it blew a resistor." He pulls out a little cylinder and shows it to Terry. In the box, nestled among wires and ugly electrical parts, is a Gideon Bible.

"This is a prototype," Bill says. "Still a few bugs in it. The production model will have all printed circuits." He gropes in his suitcase, finds another resistor and puts it in, closes the case. "Try it again."

Terry puts his fingers on the ceramic plate, turns the dial up. Almost at once, a feeling of indescribable peace comes over him. He no longer cares about Bill's haircut or Olly's T-shirts. The throbbing at the back of his head goes away.

"See? See?" says Bill, exposing his mediocre dentistry.

Bill leaves the machine with Terry. Terry calls in Lori and Reggie and swears them to silence. Over the next three days, they rough out a campaign. It is terrific. The client is impressed. Terry gets a bonus.

The fall campaign is a success. "HOLINEX for instant tranquility — the peace that passes understanding at the touch of a button, in the privacy of your own home!" Hospitals buy the professional model at $1,795. Psychiatrists buy it. The home models retail for $695 plus tax. People line up for it in department stores. It comes in Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, and Reformed versions. For the overseas market, Buddhist, Muslim, and Hindu versions are on the drawing boards.

Church and synagogue attendence zooms, then nosedives, until pastors begin allowing worshipers to bring their Holinexes. An enterprising minister in the East Village announces plans to build them into the backs of pews. Labor unrest is down. Gross national product is up.

Bunny is happy. Olly is happy. Terry is not happy. There are persistent rumors that Bill's partner, the other inventor, is confined to a mental institution, where he performs miracles of healing but has to be anchored to a bed to keep him from floating away. Yesterday, the day before Christmas, Terry saw a black man levitating up the stairway of the IRT at Fiftieth Street. A week ago he found himself speaking in Japanese, a language he does not know, to a Puerto Rican waiter in a restaurant. For the past several days, Terry has been bleeding slightly from the palms of his hands. This morning, when he left the apartment, his wife asked him, "When will you be home?"

"Verily, I know not," Terry answered.

Now he is up on the parapet of the agency building, looking down at Third Avenue, from which the strains of "Away in a Manger" arise. He knows that in a moment he will spread his arms and step off. Will he fly?

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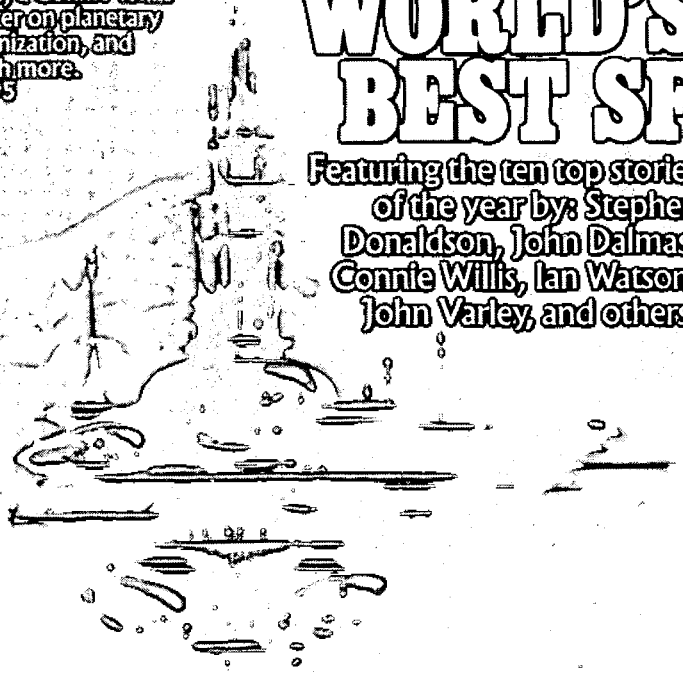

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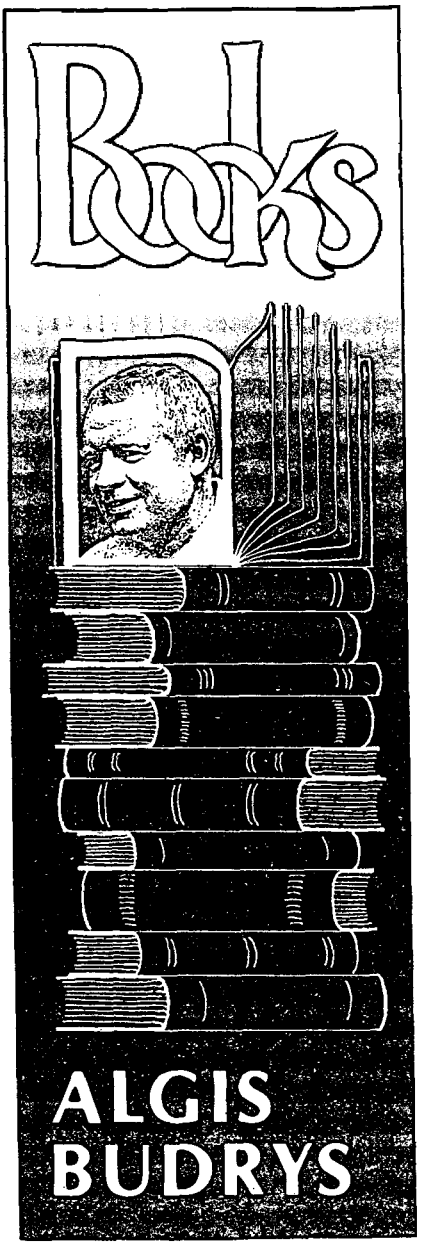

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You may not remember this, but the reason we as a community are still suspicious of Ray Bradbury is that back in the middle-to-late 1940s, when he switched from appearing in *Planet Stories* to appearing in *Mademoiselle,* he didn't take any of us with him.

We'd had hopes. The community theory had been that surely with the publication of *The Martian Chronicles* it would then follow that the "Mainstream" arbiters of cultural worthiness would turn to all of SF — that is, "our" SF, as borne upon newsstands — with a cry of happy discovery. (And this would be to our good, in some way we did not pause to examine.) When this did not occur, we blamed Bradbury and began touting Theodore Sturgeon. Sturgeon, indeed, drew attention from Martha Foley, at that time the iron-whimmed anthologist of each year's best American short stories. When that also did not lead to anything in particular, we began to live with an inkling that the situation was rather more complex than we had at first imagined. Hindsight now shows us that at that time we as a community began taking some first steps toward producing writers like Kate Wilhelm.

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Up 'til then, the cultural arbiters within SF had been biased one of two ways. The prevailing majority opinion was that SF was a serious hobby for gentlemen with a bent for acting on Western society — for engineers, for anthropologists of the Margaret Mead school, historians influenced by Toynbee, cultural philosophers like Mortimer Adler; for those who saw scholarship as means to a functional social purpose. The minority opinion was upheld by those who simplified this same tendency; that is, they were socialists, in various affiliations to political doctrine. Thus both perspectives made SF intrinsically a tool. Although the general run of reader — taken to be an adolescent male — might soak all his substance with SF* and regard Brett Sterling as a literary figure fully equal to Ernest Hemingway, the wiser heads in the community thus were essentially unanimous in not regarding it as a literature *per se*, whatever their articulations. Some of these wiser heads were subsequently persuaded to alter their views; others have been replaced by younger and more flexible sages.

We have always had our own cultural arbiters within newsstand SF, from the first time Hugo Gernsback created an editorial on the cultural import of his product, operating without much deference to what the mere reader thought. This is not in itself proof that newsstand SF has always been a literature. When our pundits believed our SF was not a literature, that was not disproof. But their existence did indicate a community willingness to have newsstand SF be a literature if that trick could be managed.

A positive proof occurred in the Bradbury case. *Planet Stories* — not Bradbury's only medium in the mid-1940s, but certainly the archetypal one — had an editorial policy calling for a proportion of "philosophical" short stories to balance the hard-driving "action" of the featured novelettes. In fact, some of the action stories conveyed more poignance and depth than some of the ponderously meaningful short fiction, but the stereotype was real enough, and early works of the young Ray Bradbury fit comfortably into it, attracting no special notice. That situation ended with the publication of the first stories that would later appear, edited and re-formatted, as *The Martian Chronicles.*

Planet readers loved them; nay, they adored them. No stories ever published during *Planet*'s long, honorable and significant history attracted anywhere near as much reader mail, as much enthusiasm or as much

**Almost invariably science fiction. At that particular time, there was little magazine fantasy to uphold the other half of speculative fiction. I don't now have a firm opinion on why this situation prevailed, or why the evolutions that began in the mid-Fifties have reversed this trend.*

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notoriety. Serious literary discussions, or attempts at them, now burgeoned in The Vizigraph, the letters column of a ragged-edged magazine with a provocatively posed woman large on every cover.

Bradbury's leaving for other pastures was a serious blow, a departure marked by visible dismay and struggle within *Planet's* editorial structure, so pervasively that the magazine never did reconcile its personality from then on. What dismayed the editors was something they had caught by contagion from the readers; the conviction that they had stumbled from the (albeit pleasant) despicable into the palpably literary. The crucial thing was that Bradbury was one of us — a fan from Waukegan, ex-publisher of his own amateur magazine and amateur fictions.

Bradbury being the veriest sort of insider, *ipso facto* pulp SF derived from Hugo Gernsback contained the seeds of literature in it, and the effect was so intense that clearly we had always had a hunger for it. Pretensions to the contrary were hypocrisy, if *Planet* could do it other media could do it, if Bradbury could do it, other writers — especially young writers — could do it, critics — especially new critics — could detect it, identify it and nurture it, and we could have our own Martha Foley (after we realized that the general-audience model was ineffectual, but before we realized that Judith Merril's imprimatur would cut insufficient ice with the Will and Ariel Durants).

So we pelted into the Fifties and mid-Fifties, and at the first Milford SF Writers' Conference, convoked by Damon Knight and Judith Merril, with the added prestige of James Blish and William Atheling, Jr., we deliberately declared an independence from pulp's commercial strictures, but I think we also by then realized that when we were literary, we were going to have to be literary in our own way.

The fact that we realize something doesn't mean that we then all act the same way in accordance, or even that we act as if we believed it. The ambivalences and confusions that marked the beginning of literature-consciousness in the newsstand SF community were the harbingers of evolution and sophistication in ambivalence and confusion, and those attributes march in hand with whatever actual literary progress we make; that is, we still don't know what we're doing, but we have good reasons for it and we can always explain.

Thus, interminable discussions about whether Bradbury is or is not an SF writer, or, if he is one, whether his career has any relevance to "our" SF, or at least any undeniable relevance. Thus, the appearance of an editor such as Harlan Ellison, whose *Dangerous Visions* anthologies*

**There is no truth to the rumor that the final volumes will be titled* At Last, Dangerous Visions.

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searched for something rooted in classic SF but stronger and more relevant to SF audiences, and a writer such as Ellison who proclaims his divorce from SF in terms that make it plain he in fact affirms the SF component within himself, and feels he is using it to hammer a better face on literature in general.

Kate Wilhelm, like Ellison, is a child of the early Milford feeling, taking her first professional career steps there and at that time. Furthermore, although Ellison never married Damon Knight except in some sense of spirit, Wilhelm did better than that, having shared lives with Knight on a round-the-clock basis for over a quarter of a century.

This is not to assure you that the author of "The Mile-Long Spaceship" in the April, 1957 *Astounding* would never otherwise have become the author of *Welcome, Chaos* as trade-published in 1983 and containing a significant proportion of material first published in a 1981 *Redbook* magazine. It is only a summation of events, and in any case Kate Wilhelm is a markedly tough person with perceptions and a mind very much her own ... which is one of the main reasons why this entire line of dissertation occurred to me as I contemplated the recently issued *Welcome, Chaos* paperback reprint from Berkley, the hardback edition having gone *versenkt* everywhere except in the review columns of SF media. So the paperback of course bears the Berkley SF colophon, invokes *Frankenstein,* quotes reviews from *Analog* and *Asimov's S.F. Magazine,* and cites Wilhelm's Hugo and Nebula awards, despite Wilhelm's by now long-established position that she simply writes, caring not to identify her work as being of any particular sort. She thus takes a position just inside the one Ellison volunteers, and in a different-but-reminiscent context from the one we think we have forced Bradbury into, whatever that may actually be.

How Kate got to this point, only her biographer can hope to know well. A reasonable assumption, knowing her character, would be that she independently had the feeling there was more to SF than she had seen before, and this was what brought her to Milford — not, in her case, an at all easy journey. I would venture further that at some prior point she had chosen to concentrate on SF in preference to general fiction, and that at the time she would, if asked sharply, have betrayed some feeling that, after all, she did not feel qualified to aspire to the status of those who worked to the higher standards that surely existed in recognized literatures.

From that position she has evolved, over time in the pursuit of a long, honorable career that is marked by a quiet feminism not as pronounced as Joanna Russ's, and a profound ecosocial concern that is not adulated in the manner met by the later works of

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Ursula LeGuin. Nor, strikingly, has her work actually gotten to resemble Knight's, any more than his resembles hers. She is that most indicative of artists, the solid practitioner, and that most reliable of human beings, the self-sufficient. Nowadays, I think she — like many others — would be more inclined to declare that at the time of her first flowering, other literatures bored her. That, I believe, would be closer to a truth many of us are beginning to let ourselves admit.

But if it is close to that truth, then Kate's career — a baseline career — offers proof we are headed in the diametrically opposite direction from the one we hoped Bradbury would take us.

If this cultural phenomenon exists at all, it is proceeding without reference to the earnings of Arthur C. Clarke or Robert Heinlein, or Isaac Asimov or Frank Herbert or Anne McCaffrey, whose best-seller success legitimizes the newsstand SF that derives from John Campbell's Golden Age, but is assuredly not the only SF, and might not be sufficient even if it were. The evolution, if it exists, is proceeding, too, without reference to the approval that outside critics show for writers, like LeGuin and Lem. Willy-nilly, they and such others as Samuel R. Delany and Kim Stanley Robinson are praised (outside our community) mostly for their resemblances to conventional artists, and for what is readable as an attempt to analogize SF into a one-for-one relationship with every feature of conventional literature.

Our Wilhelms are not among those numbers, yet they exist, they are viable, they may very well be the very best evidence we have for the idea that there is something in SF that permits art in a manner no sufficiency of spaceships or sorcerers could fully account for. But of course there is this awkward matter of *Welcome, Chaos* being marketed as SF, just because it has SF elements in it. If that seems like an absurd complaint, please consider that it has a great many more elements of other literatures. So perhaps, although we have turned around from where we hoped to go in 1950, we are still some distance away from admitting literature into us.

But you were wondering what *Welcome, Chaos* was about. It's about what happens inside the mind of a woman who realizes she's been made immortal.

It comes in layers. That's the core, and it's wrapped in the biochemical story of how this process was invented in Nazi Germany, how it works and is perforce kept secret. That, of course, has profound historical and ecological consequences, and thus political ones. So Lyle Taney — a middle-aged unmated professor of history who also happens to be a superb wildlife photographer and natu-

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ralist — has every aspect of her life profoundly perturbed when her newfound lovers surreptitiously infect her with undying.

Welcome, Chaos, like every Wilhelm novel I've read over the past ten years, is too long for its burden. That is, Wilhelm characteristically raises unnecessary bugaboos — for example, a robber-baron introduced only to fund an amoral private eye in his search for the wonder drug, when, as she shows us, the snoop is fully self-propelled and does proceed without reference to sponsorship. That is, her technique is constantly on the verge of producing red herrings, so that the reader has to keep track of things that don't bear on the payoff. I think she just sets out on her rough story, lets it carry her along, gets to where she wanted to go, and then trims out only the most obvious false meanders. For instance, somewhere in the course of the book's writing there almost certainly was a time when Wilhelm visualized a dramatic confrontation between robber baron and Taney as unwilling keeper of the secret; even though it later didn't happen, she kept the baron instead of remotivating the snoop. We expect some such confrontation, and watch for it. When the moment for it has gone by, unremarked, we stop and search our minds for it in case we somehow read it and forgot. Then we have to file away that character and untangle him from several others of his ilk within the story. And so the story is fuzzed; fuzzy stories seem long. Perhaps relevantly, an editor who was paying by the word would never have let her get away with it. And the more he liked her story, and wanted readers to see it clear, the more likely he would have been to edit her manuscript stringently.

But there are so many good things here — the lovingly depicted physical setting on the Oregon coast, the relationship between Lyle and her captor lovers, the resonances that arise from her being in effect a kidnapped bride, played against a circumstantial plot-line that makes the reader come head-to-head with what it would be like to discover, now, in our time, that some of us, possibly including ourselves, will never die. One does not, as I've said before, judge a literature by its highest attainments, any more than one judges it by its worst. One judges it by what can be done with it by good, honest practitioners working at it diligently. If Wilhelm be not an SF writer, then whatever literature she's in, that literature has a solid base.

SF adventure has a solid base, we know, and C. J. Cherryh's presence therein is one of our best contemporary attests to this proposition. Furthermore, *Chanur's Venture* is a sequel to *The Pride of Chanur,* and so has an even better than average send off to it. Buy it but don't read it. The

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more you like it, the more you'll be infuriated.

I would in fact have advised you not to buy it, for two excellent reasons, one of which is that the back cover carries a bold-faced blurb indicating that someone named Algis Bundrys, of The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, has called it a "Tour De Force." Bundrys had never read *Chanur's Venture* at the time that cover was printed, and for that matter, neither had I; some wight at DAW Books lifted the quote from my review of *The Pride of Chanur* and is being clever with you.

The *Chanur* series thus far is indeed a tour de force, its central character being a tough, flamboyant spacedog of a tramp merchant ship who happens to be a female feline in a universe where few have ever even heard of Earth and far fewer have seen an Earthling. The villains and villainies she encounters and overcomes are splendidly created; her reluctant continuing relationship with Tully, the runaway Earthman, is among the most interesting recent SF notions, and on page 293 of *Chanur's Venture,* just as things are winding into a climax whose dramatic proportions promise to release more adrenalin per cc than your bloodstream can possibly handle, we come upon

Continued in
CHANUR'S REVENGE

Well, DAW books has shrewdly chosen the instance in which to do this; the *Chanur* series can overcome even shoddiness, and out of good will we can forgive a marketing decision basedon an incomplete understanding of what shrewdness is. But have a care, DAW; have a care. Sometimes it does not do to let the readers know just what opinion you hold of their faculties.

The Philip K. Dick Memorial Award for the best United States original paperback book of 1984, announced at Norwescon, went to William Gibson's *Neuromancer.* I bring this up because last year it went to Tim Powers' *The Anubis Gates,* and Powers has another paperback original, *Dinner at Deviant's Palace,* which I think might be on the short list of finalists for 1985 books, although in all truth I don't think it will win.

Under another title, this picaresque post-Apocalypse story would stand a better chance. Deviant's Palace is a bistro where mutants and monsters pursue unspeakable diversions; a place no one in his right mind would enter voluntarily ... not even Gregorio Rivas, the ingenious, earnest, gutsy, talented and glamorous young hero of this road-novel through Gehenna. In the end, of course, he must go there, and we know he must go there, in order to rescue the woman he has never been able to forget. It's a dandy scene when it arrives. Nevertheless, dinner is a very brief meal, and out of place as top billing

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among the events here.

Rivas, nightclub performer on the pelican — a musical instrument; not what you were thinking — was at one time famous up and down the Coast as a deprogrammer; a rescuer of persons who had fallen under the sway of a religious cult that actually does have something that conveys community and ecstasy. The something stems from the activities of an alien organism come to life in the wake of an atomic war. Among bad side effects are brain burnout and a tendency to be drained of blood, in a process that converts the powdery residue into a potent consciousness-altering drug.

And onward; all this proceeds against a landscape of shards and ruins, populated by scoundrels at best, by brain-driven simulacra made by cobbling-up steam boilers, trombones and headlamps or any other garbage into robot bodies, and by hemogoblins ... not a typographical error, but a nifty auctorial invention per se and as a plot element.

It drives along, drives along; Powers is quick on his feet, fast with his mind. There is even a reference to "the Ashbless translation" of Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* so you know he's literate in the formal sense as well as functionally.

I don't know how this relates to what Milford started — or, more aptly, detected, identified, and nurtured. But it seems to be a cross between classic SF elements, classic literary elements, and something else. Whether that in fact makes an entirely new thing is a question I cannot answer here and now. But Powers is one of our better new ones in any event, and that, for now, suffices sufficiently well.

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Mr. Bretnor's new story is about the time Earth confronts its first alien race, a perfectly disciplined military society, and about the man who is chosen to negotiate in the most frightening emergency in history.

The Proud Foot of the Conqueror

BY
REGINALD BRETNOR

From the Diary of
Marshal Sir Francis Mackenzie Latrouche
United Nations Armed Forces (Canada), Retired

August 28th

It has happened. What we have all hoped for. What we have all feared. What we have been expecting since we ventured out beyond Jupiter, beyond Neptune — ever since the Space Force first came into being. I only wish that it had occurred while I was still on active duty, before they forced me out and destroyed Peking, Tientsin, Shanghai — and how many other cities? And how many tens of millions?

As things stand, I suppose I'm fortunate even to have heard about it. Hardesty, my former aide, got in touch from Ottawa, breaking security, which was brave of him. Torkonnen's made it tighter than it ever was before. The world can't hear the greatest story in its history until he gives the word. Space Marshal V. I. Torkonnen — hero of the Soviet Empire, chief of the United Nations General Staff; who killed Bombay, Calcutta, Peking — is in command now, as humanity meets its first alien race, a race from beyond our solar system certainly, and from how much farther out in space and time? Torkonnen, who will never forgive me for sending him that copy of General Burn's *Megamurder,* nor for my inscription in it.

The fleet first encountered them three weeks ago, as they emerged from behind Pluto. Who they are, I do not know — I have not been in-

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formed. But their vessels are said to be like little worlds — their size measure in miles. Hardesty didn't say how many, but he hinted that communication's been established, that there are a lot of surprises for us all behind Torkonnen's wall of secrecy.

The power and knowledge possessed by beings who can move entire armadas between the stars must be fantastic, and Torkonnen is the last man I'd trust to evaluate it accurately and to influence the critical decisions Earth's leaders may have to make.

Well, we shall see. In the meantime — this terrible time of waiting — it's hard for me to take an interest in those small things that become so important in one's daily life after retirement. Yesterday Josie, our black Lab, had eleven puppies — and Louise handed me the honor of naming them. Now the only name I can think of is Torkonnen, and I'm damned if I'll call any decent dog after him!

September 3rd

Almost a week has passed, a week of sustained secrecy and silence from UNAF HQ. However, this morning Hardesty brought me Torkonnen's top secret report to the secretary-general on our visitors.

It is astounding. We've all wondered what sort of weird aliens the universe might eventually throw our way — wigglies with tentacles, hive minds evolved from insectoids, silicon-based life-forms, all the rest. And now, of all improbabilities, they turn out to be *men,* men very like ourselves, with minor differences in bone structure and the structure of the eye, at least as far as we can see —and they are not only men, but *military* men, the very quintessence of military men. Their whole society is military. They are literally *bred* to be. Their officers are not a class; they are a *race.* So are their noncoms. So are their other ranks. And so are their priest-scientists, themselves a part of the military establishment. We call ourselves men; they call themselves *The Conquerors,* and make no bones about it.

They are extremely methodical, and very patient. They tell us that they remained in the lee of Pluto for months, while their drones relayed our media broadcasts to them: audio, video, holo. Their scientists unraveled English with no trouble — it was the nearest thing to a world language — and now they know a great deal about us, about our manners and morals, our diversity of religions and political beliefs, our rivalries and wars. They know a great deal too much, in my opinion, considering their own rigid codes of conduct and their absolute uniformity. They seem completely unimpressed by our technology, our weaponry, and they appear to think even less of us as warriors.

How do they define civilization? According to them, the whole goal of

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man — meaning themselves — is to conquer lesser men, to subdue them so completely that they will remain conquered and continue to serve their conquerors *even after those conquerors have gone their way.* The report doesn't go into detail, but it states that they've shown very convincing evidence that they have done this to many, many worlds. (Can you imagine a web of empire stretched between the stars, an empire without satraps, without prefects, without governors-general?)

Typically, Torkonnen sums up by refusing to take their claims seriously. He suggests that very possibly they are bluffing. But even he agrees that we will have to have much more information before we can formulate a policy or reply to any demands they may make. Apparently, the first real meeting after contact was at our Saturn Station, in orbit around that mighty planet. They came in a single ship — and it now seems that the original reports were exaggerated; their vessels are huge, but not miles long, perhaps half again as long as the largest twentieth-century giant tanker or aircraft carrier. Eight of their personnel arrived in a shuttle craft, and we now know that, like ourselves, they have antigravity. The report adds that further information — with photographs and additional details regarding their organization, weapons, etc. — will be on its way to the secretary-general as soon as possible. I hope Hardesty can get me a copy of that, too.

September 7th

Thank God for Hardesty. His personal loyalty has touched me deeply. The report this time is signed by General Casimirski, a very gallant Pole whom I remember well and favorably. He commands the station, and his description of the deputation sent shivers down my back.

"They are human—" he wrote, "But at the same time they are unhuman. The great difference is in the way they move, in the fact that their faces seem totally expressionless, and even more, in their eyes. Their eyes have pupils like our own, but they have no true whites. It is as though the iris gradually merges with the surrounding eye. Imagine a greenish moss agate, very pale around its outer rim, and gradually darkening toward a hard, cold, obsidian pupil. Physically, as men, they are superb, lean as greyhounds, taut as a strung bow, yet totally relaxed. Their uniforms are extremely simple, an unobtrusive color apparently denoting something, their only ornaments insignia of rank worn round their necks, and multicolored vertical badges where we would wear our service ribbons. They have no facial hair; their lips are thin; their noses unvaryingly hawklike. They have individuality, but only as Doberman pinschers have individuality. The ones who came speak English, but they

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speak it slowly, like machines, as though the concepts in their own tongue are so completely alien that every word has to be weighed.

"Their leader, who I could tell was older then the rest, stared at me for perhaps a minute. Then he introduced himself as General — he hesitated over the word, as though it was not precisely accurate — Rhuzar'yi. Then I introduced myself and said, 'General, we welcome you and your people. This is the first time we have had the pleasure of meeting people from another world. Be assured that we shall make the necessary arrangements for you to meet Earth's leaders as soon as possible.'"

"Your leaders' he replied, 'are what you call . . . civilians. We are The Conquerors, please understand. We do not speak with such as these. Our . . . commander will speak with your commander, he who commands your forces, you understand? That is necessary. We must know whether you have—' Again he hesitated, using an alien word; then, reluctantly, he translated it as *honor*. 'We must determine whether you have *honor*. What we have learned of you tells us that certain men in your history have been capable of *honor,* but what of your entire. . . ' Again the hesitation. '. . . your entire army, your command?"

There had been no exchange of politenesses, no acceptance of proffered hospitality, but they had answered Casimirski's questions openly and fully. They had fourteen ships, all approximately as large as that which brought him. "If you wish, you can come back to it with us," the envoy said. "Then you can report what we will show you to your superiors."

Casimirski had of course accepted, taking two of his aides with him. "I was astounded," he reported. "The vessel was *not* a battleship; it seemed completely unarmed. But they showed me that it had many, many small attack craft, each perhaps fifty feet long, like combined vessel vehicles. But more than anything, I was reminded of a Mongol horde, for all their women and children were aboard. Everything was disciplined; and at once I saw the great difference between officers, noncommissioned officers, and other ranks. It was physical. The noncoms looked like intelligent but unimaginative prizefighters; the privates hulked like willing tame bears. But the strangest thing was the perfect courtesy between ranks. Subordinates did not always render their equivalent of a salute first; all ranks saluted *one another.* It reminded me of those novels of old Poland by Siendiewicz: *With Fire and Sword* and *The Deluge* and *Pan Machael.* There was such mutual respect between ranks then."

Casimirski went on to describe their social structure. There is no social mobility; a man is born a private or a noncom and that is what he remains — and all of them are satisfied, for respect permeates their entire

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order. Their collective noun for a group of sergeants, for example, is a *virtue* of sergeants. Ambition is confined to attaining excellence in one's station.

I read the report several times, and it convinced me that they are probably very, very dangerous.

September 22nd

A long wait, but much has happened. First, Torkonnen's security has been breached. The word is out. No details — just enough to start the media screaming hysterically, spreading every kind of crazy rumor. All sorts of religious fanatics and demagogues have been whipping up fear and frenzy; there have been major riots in India and South America, in Los Angeles and Cairo and Lord only knows where else. The world's national governments, who had *not* been informed, are raising hell and demanding information, and the screeching in the General Assembly is — if we can believe such an improbability — unprecedented.

So the pressure is really going to hit Torkonnen — not only from the member nations, but also from the secretary general, Dr. Corua-Fanit, who has always been too close to him for comfort. It will not increase the probability of any sane reaction to the intruders.

Next, I've received two more reports. Just yesterday Hardesty came through on his way back from Geneva, and left me copies. These also are from Casimirski. The first simply amplified his previous one. The second is much more important. The Conquerors' fleet, while it has not entered the solar system proper, has come in closer and is hovering on what — if we discount Pluto — can be considered the system's outer boundary. Casimirski asked them outright if he could visit the fleet, if he could inspect every ship; and the envoy, without hesitation, told him he could. They left immediately, Casimirski taking only a single aide, and it was a strange voyage, for there was *no* conversation. All the envoy and his officers would talk about was business. Though Casimirski and his aide ate with them, at a separate table in their officers' mess, The Conquerors talked around them, in their harsh, staccato native tongue — and even then without inflection, without discernible emotion.

When they reached the closely grouped vessels, Casimirski was taken to each of them, and found them all identical, all equally disciplined, all with their small assault craft, all with their crowds of women and children, and all definitely *not* armed. Even more interestingly, they appeared to have no provisions for security, *none at all*. Seemingly, nothing was hidden from him, including the weaponry of their attack craft, which he says is

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very similar to our own. Casimirski, of course, was careful to ask no intrusive questions; and on one occasion, when he started to board an attack craft, he inquired whether he might not be infringing security. The answer was typical of our visitors: the escorting officer said simply, "We are The Conquerors. The strong are always secure."

Of course they showed him records of their conquered planets and their now subject populations, and he was impressed. "I saw an unending panorama of servility, of heads always bent, of faces on which no shadow of resistance — no, not even of simmering resentment — lives. And when I asked how they mangaged so to humble those they'd conquered, my escort replied coldly, 'That we will not tell you. It is better for you not to know. If you knew, it would affect the decisions your chief commander soon will have to make.'"

It seems that they do not subject each invaded world to the same process, classifying them as — well, there's no other way to put it — *barbarians without honor,* to be subdued utterly, or *primitives with barbaric honor,* who are given a somewhat higher status, rather after the manner of the Romans when they were feeling magnanimous or needed irregular troops.

Casimirski has also seen their priest-scientists, physically almost indistinguishable from the officers, but he has learned nothing much about them except that they serve a religion of conquest, dedicated to a war-god who, I gather, makes poor old Mars seem feeble by comparsion. What their scientific accomplishments may be, he couldn't guess, except that they obviously have FTL — they'd have to. Also, he suspects that they must be excellent geneticists. Again, he was careful not to be too inquisitive, following the rule of never asking questions he himself would be ordered not to answer, or that common sense told him might be sensitive.

Their diet, from what he saw of it, resembles ours: meat and fish, frozen undoubtedly; hydroponic vegetables; a beverage he could describe as some sort of sparkling tea; and a variety of alcoholic drinks, taken very ceremoniously and with extreme moderation. If there were beasts aboard, he did not see them , neither pets nor livestock. Nor did he learn anything of The Conquerors' lives. He was introduced to none of their women — tensely beautiful, austere beings very much in the background, simply and richly robed, their hair generally worn long. He saw the children only at a distance, and was astonished at their spontaneous discipline and their expressionless faces when they looked in his direction, small copies of their fathers. He found out, too, that at night, after their evening meal, they sang: long, ominous battle chants, chorales of conquest.

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One thing that surprised him, especially in view of their high technology, was that all the officers and noncoms wore edged weapons — swords, dirks, or daggers — and wore them without affectation, as though they were a part of themselves

So incidentally, did the larger boy-children.

So, of course, in feudal Japan, had the samurai.

It was not in Casimirski's report, but Hardesty told me they'd turned down Torkonnen's offer to meet with their C in C after they learned that he was "only" chief of staff. I wonder if that means Corua-Fanit will get him promoted. Apparently a chief of staff, to their way of thinking, is nothing more than a glorified errand boy. They practically told him that, as he did not command troops in the field (if *field* can be translated into interstellar terms), he simply wasn't fit to speak to.

I'd like to have been there when he got the news.

And now I'd best go downstairs, and let Louise show me the pups again, and then have a martini or two with her and try to allay the anxieties any intelligent woman would feel in our threatened world. Yesterday she was worrying whether I might be recalled to active duty. "Me?" I answered. "With our friend Torkonnen in the driver's seat? Hardly!"

Now, after what I've already told her, I think she's more concerned with the danger to us all.

Even as I myself am.

September 27th

The past days have been anxious ones, with no further word from Hardesty or anybody else. And now, abruptly and without warning, the sword has fallen. I have been proved a poor prophet, a very poor one indeed.

Shortly after five this morning, I received a phone call from the secretary general's office. Dr. Corua-Fanit wished to speak to me, and would I take the call. Of course I said I would; and a moment later there his voice was, smooth and insinuating as ever.

"Good morning, Sir Francis."

"Good morning, Doctor."

"I trust you and Madame are both well?"

My God, I thought, ***what is the slimy little beast getting at?*** "Very well, thank you," I replied.

"Good, good! Sir Francis, we are recalling you to active duty."

"You're what?"

"We are recalling you to active duty, of course at the rank you now hold, but with even greater responsibilities — oh, yes, very much greater responsibilities. You have, I'm sure, heard the news of the arrival of aliens from another system?"

"I've heard a lot of media hysteria. There's been damned little hard information."

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"Well, you shall have it — indeed you shall. You will be fully briefed as soon as you arrive. Sir Francis, the world now faces an emergency — the most frightening emergency in all our history. You are needed."

I decided to be frank. "Doctor, I think you'll understand that I'm not anxious to serve under Marshal Torkonnen, and that the prospect gives me ample reason to stay retired."

He laughed a little shrilly. "My dear Sir Francis! But you will not be serving *under* him. This I promise you, I myself." His tone changed for the nastier. "In any case, as you are not disabled, the terms of your commission permit us to order you back, do they not?"

I made no reply, remembering that this was the man who, scarcely three years before, had authorized the killing of nearly 40 million human beings.

Finally I said, "Very well, Doctor, but I'll have one request, a modest one. I want the officer who was my personal aide, Brig. Gen. Olaf Hardesty, reassigned to me, and I'd like to have his orders issued now."

He thanked me, his voice sounding its insincerity. "Sir Francis, your subspace vehicle will be awaiting you at Ottawa, and your aide will be aboard. I am delighted. I myself will outline your new assignment and your duties."

"Very well, Doctor." We said good-bye.

There was no point in going back to bed, and Louise, who had wakened, was sitting up, looking at me silently.

"No, I suppose you can't turn them down, can you?" she said, almost whispering.

I shook my head. "I wish I could!"

She nodded, and leaned toward me, and kissed me. "I'll go downstairs and get Marie up and start fixing breakfast, and send Sergeant Warnick up to help you pack."

Two hours later Hardesty and I were through the stratosphere.

"Sir Francis," Hardesty said presently, "did the secretary general tell you what your new job was going to be?"

"He said he'd explain it when I arrived."

Hardesty looked at me a little strangely, a little apprehensively. "Sir," he said. "I — well, I'm sure of this. You're the new C in C."

Two hover-limos were waiting for us when we landed, and an Italian colonel, a military aide, took us to them, directing Hardesty to the second, opening the door so I could board the first. I was not surprised to find Corua-Fanit sitting there, a thin, inconsiderable man with sparse black hair and an unhealthy skin, his eyes concealed behind tinted lenses that were part of the public image he cultivated — a man to whom circumstances had given great power; in my opinion, a weak, cruel, ruthless man.

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The fact that, where matters military were concerned, he was completely under Torkonnen's influence did not help the situation.

As the limo whipped through traffic, I reflected that antigravity and its associated drives had not only reduced the terrific noise level in great cities almost to a whisper, but had been responsible for putting the destiny of the world into Corua-Fanit's hands, for without these developments, the Space Force would have remained what it started out to be — a rocket-propelled group of vessels watching out for stray asteriods, giant meteors, and, on the off chance, extraterrestrial visitors.

He smiled at me with his teeth. "I suppose, Sir Francis, that you have been wondering what sort of assignment I have for you?"

"Naturally, sir."

"I'm sure it'll please you. We have created a new post, one that our armed forces have never had before, the post of supreme commander — commander in chief. It is one you are ideally fitted for, under our present extraordinary circumstances especially. Let me fill you in briefly. When we arrive at my residence, I shall give you the pertinent reports from those officers who have been in closest touch with the — shall we say invaders?"

Then he proceeded to tell me everything I already knew, including The Conquerors' refusal to negotiate with anyone but a supreme military commander. "They turned down Marshal Torkonnen, not just because he lacked the title, but because they disapproved of his nuclear attack on the rebel powers. They call themselves Conquerors, but they are a strange breed of military, I assure you."

I began to see the light. My controversy with Torkonnen and my retirement had received much publicity. The Conquerors, thorough as they were, would certainly have heard of it. Hence my recall and my new title. What powers it would carry with it remained to be seen.

Corua-Fanit was astute. "I am sure these people will recognize that you are a man of honor." He laughed a shrill little braying laugh. "And the fact that you and they see eye to eye about how war should be waged will be most helpful also."

"Won't they think it odd that the post has so suddenly been created, and that I myself have so suddenly been called to fill it?"

"I think not, " he replied. "We've informed them that you were *de facto* C in C prior to your retirement, but that it simply was not our custom to use the formal title."

I thought it a pretty thin arrangement, but saw no point to saying so. I said, "Doctor, I'm honored. But I can't possibly accept if the whole thing is only a pretense. I will have to have those real powers the title implies — powers of military decision

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and command — for responsibility, as you yourself said, will inevitably come with it."

"Oh, you will, you will!" he exclaimed, putting his arm around my shoulders, apparently not noticing that I stiffened to avoid shrinking from his touch. "Your orders have already been prepared and signed by me, giving total authority over our armed forces and also empowering you to act as the world's ambassador plenipotentiary. I shall give them to you as soon as we arrive. However —and I trust this will meet with your approval — we do not intend to publish them until your negotiations with the alien commander are completed. We can't afford to let news get out that may lead our already frightened public to think we prepare for war, which the publicized appointment of a C in C certainly would do. So, for the time being, the news must be restricted to the few high-level officers directly concerned.'

I didn't like it, but still I couldn't quarrel with it — it did make sense.

"And when do you and my alien counterpart want me to leave for our first rendezvous?"

"As soon as possible. Tomorrow morning, if you can. That should give you ample time to go over the reports, and if it doesn't, well, it'll take three days to ferry you to Saturn Station and you can take them with you."

"I'll also require a complete report on the present disposition of our major forces. Can Marshal Torkonnen have it ready for me, too?"

He frowned. "Torkonnen can't. He's off Earth. He said there was nothing for him here to do, in view of your previous — ah, friction. So, with my approval, he left to inspect all our bases and stations." Again he laughed. "He told me he was *not* going to stop off at Saturn Station."

I did not comment.

Then he went on to tell me that, according to Casimirski, the aliens were proposing to bring their entire fleet within the solar system. "We're all agreed," he said, "that probably it would be unwise to try to stop them at this stage. But on no account must they be allowed close to Earth, certainly no closer than Saturn Station. Otherwise we could have worldwide panic."

I assured him I'd keep the point in mind.

Finally we arrived at his enormous residence, where I turned down his offer of refreshment and dinner invitation, saying I'd like to set to work immediately, and asking for a tray to be sent up for Hardesty and me. Rather reluctantly, he showed us to our quarters. A few minutes later the same Italian colonel arrived with a dispatch case containing my orders and the reports. I read the orders in Corua-Fanit's presence, and could find no fault with them. I told him so.

As soon as the door closed behind him, we went to work. There was little

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in the reports we did not know. However, there was much more detail and about two dozen photos. Apparently the intruders had made no objection to being photographed. I scanned the lot, promising myself that I'd study them at length once I was in space, where they could be discussed more freely. But the most interesting report of all I read three times before I said good night to Hardesty and went to bed.

It was Torkonnen's *Estimate of Alien Forces and Capabilities.*

September 29th

I started the last entry in this journal on the way to Geneva, scribbled a bit more of it after I'd digested Torkonnen's *Estimate,* then finished it after we'd broken free from Earth's gravity and were a long way from Corua-Fanit.

The *Estimate* appalled me, but it was exactly what I'd have expected. I can't, of course, give it in full here, but I shall quote its highlights.

"In my considered professional opinion, "Torkonnen wrote, "we should not take the claims of these so-called Conquerors too seriously, for several reasons:

1. Their weapons and equipment — which they have not tried to hide from us — are in no way impressive. Their major ships are unarmed, transports only, and the attack craft they carry are actually inferior to our own vessels of the same class.
2. The fact that their ships are cluttered with women and children indicates a probably nomadic way of life and, consequently, a shortage of serious military resources.
3. They have antigravity and antigravity propulsion. So do we. They have Faster Than Light drives, but this does not necessarily indicate scientific superiority. Their priest-scientists are dedicated to the service of a primitive war-god, which argues that scientific thinking cannot have penetrated their culture too thoroughly. As, admittedly, they prey on other civilizations, they may very well have obtained FTL by piracy. Futhermore, FTL is of no use within a solar system, only in open space. It gives them no advantage whatsoever.
4. The evidence they have shown us of conquered planets and peoples, while possibly a record of successful suppression, suggests that the conquered probably had no military power or will to resist. Mankind is neither so feeble or so passive."

Finally, after a detailed survey of comparative weaponry, he gave his conclusions:

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. . .

"5. As I have stated, their attack craft are numerous and adequately armed. However, their armament is in no way superior to that of our own equivalent vessels. Most important, *they have neither ships nor vessels comparable to those of our cruiser class, capable of destroying large asteroids and even minor moons.* In this regard, we are superior and, to my mind, decisively so. Their fleet is as vulnerable as Calcutta or Bombay."

I shuddered, not just at his casual mention of those cities, but because he took so much for granted. Our own wars, for example, had shown that savagely primitive beliefs and a high level of science and technology are by no means incompatible. However, when I compared the *Estimate* to the report on fleet dispositions I had received before leaving, I was to some extent reassured. Signed by General Cordeiro, a deputy chief of staff, it shows every major unit, either deployed or on the way, and all positioned so that if the aliens actually attack, Earth can be defended —but all far enough away from Saturn Station, where Corua-Fanit suggested The Conquerors place themselves, to offer no suggestion of hostile intent on our part.

Our own ship, *Aconcagua,* and her complement are also reassuring. She corresponds to what, in Nelson's day, would have been called a dispatch boat — very lightly armed, with perhaps a dozen in her crew, all very young, all unaccustomed to having a space marshal aboard and terribly impressed, and all obviously frightened to death by Torkonnen's KGB style of security. They are polite and very pleasant.

October 6th

A great deal to report. We arrived at station on the twentieth, and of course Casimirski was expecting us. He was delighted to see me, and said so. He had been told of my new post, with strict instructions to keep the news from his personal except for the very few who would come in contact with The Conquerors' envoy who naturally had been informed. We had passed the envoy's vessel following in the station's orbit, and scarely an hour elasped before he himself appeared.

Casimirski and I were having a drink together when the envoy was admitted, and I saw instantly that everything I had heard about The Conquerors was true. He had two officers with him, and all wore the same uniform, severly cut and golden gray, and at first glance they looked as though they had been hatched from the same egg. Only their neck insignia distinguished them. The envoy's was a studded disk, possibly of platinum, as big as the Order of the Garter and suspended from what looked like

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a gold and black enamel chain. His aides wore smaller ovals, green and rimmed with gold, hanging from narrower plain chains. All three wore rows of vertical metal ornaments, enameled, mysterious in design and color, but of fine craftmanship; Fabergé, I think, could have done no better. But the strangest thing was that, though they indeed were *men,* they were men differently constructed. Their bones seemed not only flatter than our own, but hinged differently, as if put together by a different Maker. They did not move as we move. And their eyes — well, all I can say is that they are alive, but not in the same way as ours, or even a tiger's or a hawk's. They are profoundly disquieting.

Casimirski introduced us, and the envoy acknowledged the introduction only with a cursory movement of his right hand, raising it rigidly, palm upward, to his waist. Then he spoke, and as Casimirski had described, it was like a machine speaking.

"Our supreme commander is ready," he informed me. "He will speak with you today, you understand? Decisions will be made."

Casimirski was as surprised as I myself. "Where is he?" he asked.

"He is . . . aboard our ship. He came with us, from our fleet."

We were taken aback.

"You can leave now, yes?" snapped the envoy.

"I shall leave—" I tried to keep my face as expressionless as his. "—when I have refreshed myself and discussed matters with General Casimirski here. Let us say one hour."

Giving no evidence of whether or not he was annoyed by this, he made the strange motion with his right hand again and withdrew.

Precisely an hour later, he was back, and in a matter of minutes he and I and Casimirski, and Casimirski's aide and Hardesty, were in their shuttle craft and on the way.

Their great ship opened to receive it. The shuttle settled gently to its berth. We left it, and the envoy led us through seemingly endless corridors and compartments, all of metal, but carpeted in a dark green, their indirect lighting glowing off walls that alternated between pleasant light grays and blues to soft yellows. I saw their women and children, their noncoms and their other ranks, their priest-scientists — and it was as though none of them saw me. As far as any outward demonstration was concerned, I simply wasn't there.

Finally an elevator took us vertically at least three hundred feet, and we emerged into some sort of command center, complete with screens not too unlike ours, with communications and control consoles, but all reduced to an utter simplicity we could not have matched.

The room was semicircular, and at the very center of its radius was a crescent console with a single chair behind it. Here one man sat, and I

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realized immediately that their C in C and I now faced each other. I looked at him, and if his officers had seemed to be the quintessence of everything military — well, he was the quintessence of his people. He was tall, taller than any I had yet encountered, and everything about him was accentuated. His face was harder, harsher, his weird moss agate eyes colder and more penetrating. A clean white scar zigzagged across his forehead and ended on a cheekbone. His neck insignia was a glowing star hanging from a chain of small golden swords. His service badges swept across his chest.

I looked at him, He looked through me.

The envoy stopped, motioning the others to a halt. "Proceed," he said.

I marched to within two feet of the console. I bowed.

Slowly, he stood up and made the same right-hand gesture as the envoy.

I introduced myself; obviously no one else was going to. "I am Space Marshal Sir Francis Mackenzie Latrouche, commander in chief of the armed forces of the United Nations of Earth," I said.

"I am Ar'hloyk'ū. I am . . . supreme commander. We are The Conquerors, you . . . understand?"

His words were recognizable, but his accent could scarcely have been reproduced.

"I shall inform you . . . yes? . . . of our demands. Everything then will . . . depend on you. We have learned much. We understand your wars. Your history is of betrayals, of broken treaties, of war making against the . . . defenseless, even, women, children, cities. You do not deny this?"

He did not invite me to sit down. He himself showed no sign of doing so. We stood there, staring into each other's eyes, and I could not deny the statement he had made. "What you have said, Supreme Commander, is true — but only partly true. Not all our military men have been men of honor, but many have. I could name you any number whose sense of honor has been inflexible, who would never think of breaking an agreement, who would scorn to wage war against noncombatants."

"This, " he said "we know. We have heard of you and that you were — how do you say? — retired before your last war. Perhaps you, as a man, are capable of honor. Now we must know whether, as commander in chief you have power to speak . . . for all your armed forces? The power to bind them with your word of *honor*?"

"I have," I said. "I can speak for all the warriors with the honor of a warrior, you understand?"

"I can."

"Then this is what I say to you. We will bring our fleet within your system, so that after you . . . hear our terms there need be no delay in carrying them out."

I nodded, not letting my face be-

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tray my surge of anger at his arrogance.

"We shall do this, and we require your word of honor that we shall neither be interfered with nor attacked."

"You have it," I replied. "However, there will be one condition."

"Condition?" He made it sound absolutely unbelievable.

"One condition. The peoples of Earth have no experience of other races. As you know from our media broadcasts, they are already frightened almost to the point of panic. If you bring your fleet too close to Earth, chaos will result. I must request that you come no closer than the vicinity of our Saturn Station, where I met your envoy."

He thought for a moment — at least he stood there staring at me. Then: "For the time, " he said, "we will do this. Then we, you and I , will talk again about our terms . . . also the status we will give you."

"And our choice will be?"

His knowledge of English was not quite adequate to putting it concisely, and he had to search for terms to express his exact meaning. Finally, however, I gathered that our status, depending on how they rated our capacity for honor, would range from the best, an equivalent of *most favored barbarian,* to the worst, utter subjugation.

"Your officers have been shown," he declared. "It is not a desirable condition for men with . . . pride."

"How do you accomplish it?" I asked.

He kept on staring through me. "As we have said, that is the one thing we will not tell you, for your decision then would not be your own . . . you understand?"

I nodded. Further questioning was useless.

"So, when our fleet arrives, a matter of perhaps five of your days, you and I will meet again. Between us, all will be settled. I have your word . . . of honor?"

"You have my word of honor," I said.

Again the right-hand gesture. Again I bowed. The conference was at an end. The envoy said, "Come. We shall return."

The trip back to the station was a silent one. Only after we had arrived and the envoy's ship was on its way did any of us give vent to how we felt. Casimirski swore in Polish for a full minute. "God in Heaven! he cried. "What arrogant sons of bitches! Insufferable! And yet — sir, I hate to say this. I don't want you of all people, to think I am a coward, but sir, I feel that they are a very old culture, incredibly strong, incredibly experienced, and far more dangerous than they look. I don't care if their armament even seems inferior. There's more to them than *braggadocio,* much more."

"What do you think, Hardesty?"

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"I agree, sir. I think we must walk very carefully, and maybe even take our lumps, for a time at least, when you and he negotiate. If we have to, of course we'll fight, but we ought to do it only as a last resort."

"That is my view also," I said. "I just hope Corua-Fanit agrees with us when it comes down to the nitty-gritty."

I composed my report to the secretary-general, and Casimirski sent it off directly. With it, I asked for an up-to-the-minute report on the present disposition of our forces, and for instructions as to how I would take over command should military action prove necessary. Then we waited for the hours to pass while the messages bridged those vast distances.

The answer came during supper. Corua-Fanit approved of how I'd handled things, assured me there'd been no changes in dispositions since the deputy chief of staff's last report, and told me that, when and if necessary, I could immediately assume command through normal staff channels.

Hardesty isn't happy. He doesn't trust Corua-Fanit. He doesn't trust Torkonnen, even if he's somewhere on the other side of the system. However, Hardesty agrees that the course we have followed has been the only possible one, and that everything does seem to be in order.

• • •

October 14th

Yes, everything seemed to be in order. But it was not. On the eleventh, right on schedule, the thirteen alien ships neared Saturn, and were in touch with us before we could pick them up visually. They said they'd prefer to hover on antigrav, but would go into orbit if we so desired — a degree of consideration that seemed foreign to them. I told them to take their choice, but we would prefer them within easy communicating distance.

And at that point all communication was cut off — all except a flood of signals from vessels of our own, vessels that were suposed to be far, far away. None of the signals were in the clear; we could make nothing of them.

"Christ!" shouted Hardesty. "It sounds like a bloody battle going on!"

"It is," whispered Casimirski.

Half an hour later we found out what had happened. An *Aconcagua*-class ship pulled in, torn almost to ribbons. We winkled out her crew, what was left of them. Torkonnen had put practically all our main strength hovering behind Saturn — after all, Corua-Fanit, with my unwitting aid, had set the aliens up for him; and they had decelerated almost completely when he struck. There was no way they could have escaped him—

But then, they didn't need to.

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They did not move. Around each of their vessels appeared a faint nimbus, extending out to four or five diameters, and whenever a weapon was directed at it — whether a missile, a laser, a particle beam, anything — it glowed momentarily, and then the weapon was either absorbed or exploded or deflected. Each of those halos was impenetrable.

The C.O. of the *Aconcagua*-class sat there, having the station medics dress his wounds, gasping out his story. Each of the great ships had opened its maw, and the attack craft had poured forth in swarms — and they, too, were surrounded by the protective shields. "The bastards must have something combining antigrav and their FTL drives," said the C.O., shaking his head. "They *must*. How else could they have managed it? How else?"

Of course it didn't matter, not in the least. We could tell by the frantic signals sputtering out that Torkonnen's forces were being as swiftly and ruthlessly destroyed as he had destroyed those cities.

He had betrayed me. He had tried to betray The Conquerors. He had betrayed Earth and all mankind.

I only hoped that he would be on Earth when I arrived.

Half an hour later, with as many of the station's people as we could crowd aboard, we were on our way; and we made it in two and a half days, setting down at Geneva Spaceport. We knew The Conquerors would be coming, but we also knew that they'd be in no hurry. They had no need to be.

Ashore, I was immediately surrounded by a gaggle of staff officers and hysterical civilians. I pushed through them to a limo I recognized as Corua-Fanit's, waited for Hardesty to get in with me, and told the driver, "Take me to your leader."

"He's at armed forces HQ," he said.

"Get there!" ordered Hardesty.

We rode in silence, and it took only a few minutes to reach the old League of Nations building by the lake where I , as C in C, would have had my office.

We marched directly, Hardesty and I, to the office of the chief of staff, and there we found them both: Corua-Fanit, looking as though he had been suddenly pumped out, then filled with cold, gray dishwater; and Torkonnen, massive and lowering, frightened now but still hostile and defiant. Whether they had returned from space or whether he had even been off Earth, I did not know. Nor did I care.

I said nothing to them. There would have been no point to it. And if they spoke, I did not hear it.

Instead, I drew the pistol I had taken from the station, and shot each of them. I shot them in the forehead, killing each instantly. Then I sent Hardesty to find men to get them out of there, to dispose of them.

I sat down at the desk, and began

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this final entry in my journal, and waited for The Conquerors to come down. Hardesty took a chair next to me.

We waited patiently. What else could we do?

Now they are here. Through the window I can see the sky filled with their small assault craft, each surrounded by its protective field, the field that renders them invulnerable. They are coming down swiftly. In the distance they look almost like falling leaves.

Now their first craft has landed, on the lawn across the road and directly in front of headquarters.

Five of them have marched out of it, and they are striding, in their precise, strangely jointed way, toward us. In moments they will be here. And they are no longer expressionless.

I must say that I do not like the look on their fa—

"Garth will now read the minutes of next month's meeting."

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Robert Wilson was born in 1953 in California, now lives in Toronto, from which he sends this perfectly chilling story about little Sarah, who undertakes piano lessons and instead receives instruction in something quite strange...

The Blue Gularis

BY

ROBERT CHARLES WILSON

There was nothing for it, little Sarah must have Lessons; and so the small, dark shrunken man was introduced into the household like a Lobe-Fin amongst a school of Gourami.

It wasn't Sarah's idea. Sarah, in fact, was dead set against it. The Lessons — piano lessons — were her mother's notion. Mrs Chesley had married into her husband's shiftless family, subsisted as they did on the remains of the family fortune, but she was determined that her daughter would not be raised an idler. And so Sarah, who would have been perfectly happy attending school during the day and tending her tropical fish in the evenings, was persuaded into an uncomfortable dress (yellow, a color she hated) and presented to Mr. Bodega on a Saturday morning.

"Sarah Chesley," he said. "How do you do."

Sarah looked at him with dismay. She had imagined a piano teacher to be a formidable and horrible thing, but Mr. Bodega was even more formidable and horrible. He was so small and old as to seem deflated, a pinkish brown skin from which the contents had been partially drained. His eyes were an unsettingly bright, focused blue; and his teeth, which he displayed prominently, were uneven and matched her dress.

Sarah's mother, a buxom woman capable of lifting the dining room table unaided, pushed Sarah forward. "Shake hands, dear."

She extended her small white hand tenuously. Mr. Bodega put down his valise — an enormous mud-brown case peeling at the corners, which seemed from the way he carried it to contain something heavy but fragile — and reached out (too eagerly, Sar-

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ah thought) with his own long and parchment-like fingers. "So this is our little Liszt manqué. Well, well."

Sarah noticed her mother's approving smile.

"If we can begin," Mr. Bodega said, "as soon as possible. . . ."

"Of course. The piano is in the parlor. Sarah will show you. I have shopping to do, but Charles and Emmeline are upstairs, if you need anything."

"Thank you so much." He bowed then — actually *bowed,* Sarah thought.

She guided him through the hallway and into the parlor, a room that smelled musty for not having been occupied. Sarah's mother had insisted that the house must have a Receiving Room for Guests (even though the Chesleys had never in Sarah's experience *had* Guests), and so the parlor was closed up and declared off-limits save for periodic dusting. In it were installed expensive but useless pieces of furniture, such as the glass-doored bookcase containing an entire set of Will Durant, or the matching lamps with claw feet and women's faces, or the piano. The room possessed only one small, high window, and the ivy had climbed over that.

"Scales," Mr. Bodega said, seating her at the piano. "Scales, Sarah, are the foundation of music;" he showed her, his bony fingers surprisingly agile, how to poke the yellowed keys while intoning the names of the notes. This Sarah did obediently over and over, while the room filled up with morning heat and dust rose like mist from deep within the body of the piano. She thought she might choke. She rather hoped she would, in fact; it would gain her a moment's peace, or possibly a glass of water. But whenever she flagged, Mr. Bodega would sternly direct her attention back to the Scales, until her head began to swim and her fingers felt clumsy and numb. An enormous amount of time passed in this fashion — almost half an hour.

Finally Mr. Bodega said, "Stop!"

Sarah did.

He looked at her — not unkindly, Sarah thought, but with a certain evaluating frankness that made her uncomfortable. She began to wonder if he was practicing X-Ray Vision or some similar arcane power.

He said then, his voice dry but insinuating, as if it had been lubricated with talcum power, "You don't really want to learn the piano, do you?"

"No," she confessed. There seemed no point in hiding it.

"No. That is perhaps as it should be. Little girls very seldom wish to learn the piano; those who do are usually disagreeable. It was your mother's idea?"

She was impressed with his perspicacity. "Yes. She *knows* I won't like it. She—" But then Sarah stopped, wondering how much of this might reach her mother's ears.

"She feels you should do some-

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thing unpleasant. To build character."

Sarah was delighted. "Right!"

"Tell me, then — what do you like to do?"

She examined his wrinkled and curiously old-fashioned suit, and wondered if he would understand. "Fish," she murmured.

"Fish — for trout? The flies, the hooks, the horrid worms?"

"No, no!" She reddened. *"Tropical* fish. I keep them, I have a small aquarium. I need a larger one, but Momma says I can't have it unless...." She looked back at the piano.

"Unless you do well at your Lessons."

"Yes."

"Does your father object to your fish?"

"Daddy? Not at all! That's the thing, see. In this family we all have hobbies. We don't do any work, so we have hobbies instead. Daddy has Mushrooms, and Aunt Emmeline has Old Bottles. I have Fish. All except Momma; she doesn't have anything. . . ."

"And she resents the rest of you who do."

"Exactly, " Sarah said, delighted with his knack for finishing sentences she had not the nerve to finish herself. "Would you like to see?"

"Yes, please," said Mr. Bodega. "I approve of hobbies."

"You can leave that here," Sarah said, indicating his massively heavy valise; but he said no, he would prefer to keep it with him.

• • •

They went upstairs quietly. Daddy napped this time of day. Daddy napped after all meals, and often before them.

She showed Mr. Bodega the Mushroom Room. Except for the carpet, a water-stained Persian antique, everything here was devoted in some fashion to mycology. A bookcase along one wall spilled out field guides, volumes of lore, a huge dog-eared book of photographs of Toltec mushroom stones. Specimen cases held in their shadowed depths small, dried samples shriveled almost beyond recognition, like the ears of dead animals, but meticulously labeled: *Stropharia semiglobata, Clitocybe illudens, Naematoloma capnoides.* The air itself had a peculiar sporulative must.

Mr. Bodega examined it all with obvious relish. "A very thoroughgoing man, your father. Devoted."

Farther down the hall, they stopped, Sarah introduced her new friend (for this was how she had begun to think of him) to Aunt Emmeline, who was in the solarium with a book, but hurried him on to the real attraction, the Bottle Room.

Emmeline had never married, and Sarah sometimes speculated that the energy normally so channeled was devoted instead to her Bottles. She traveled all over the state, and often out of it, to obscure antique stores, rural flea markets, small-town swap meets. Her treasures had accumulated over the course of years. Sarah opened the door proudly, and they

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were engulfed at once in a greenish glow. The eye naturally rebounded from so many Bottles, Sarah thought, as it would from the inside of a gemstone.

She had even learned some of the nomenclature." See here," she said to Mr. Bodega: "a Dunmore, a Demijohn; a Pitkin, a Chestnut, a Carboy! Here, on the sideboard, a set of fine mint Hemingray Insulators! A rare Dyottville pint flask with a commemorative picture of George Washington!"

"Fine," Mr. Bodega said, his pupils aswim with reflected bottles. "Commendable."

But Sarah had saved the best for last.

"It's not a very *extensive* collection, " she informed him, leading the way to the small downstairs room her mother had so grudgingly allowed her to set aside, "but it's *mine.*"

There was only one aquarium, set discreetly on an end table, a small fluorescent light generating a green glow reminiscent of the Bottle Room, bubbles rising from the aerator, fronds of Wild Anacharis undulating gently.

"Fine, fine." Mr. Bodega bent down, peering. Reflected in the aquarium walls, Sarah thought, he looked rather like one of the Apple Dolls her aunt sometimes brought her from county fairs. He smelled funny, too, she thought — like cardamom seed. "Oh, very special, yes."

She pointed out each fish. "These are my Angelfish. These — aren't they pretty? — Tiger Barbs. And the big one is a Banded Leporinus."

She loved to watch the colors as they swam, like jewels, so hypnotic . . but then she heard the click and whine of the back door opening, and felt Mr. Bodega's hand clasped almost painfully around her upper arm, urging her back to the parlor.

"Scales," he hissed into her ear, meaning the piano kind. *"Scales."*

She went through the weary motions with her fingers, sighing: had her brief friendship with old man ended so soon?

They heard Mrs Chesley bustling in the entrance hall.

"Scales," Mr. Bodega whispered; then, even more intimately, "Tell me, Sarah — no, don't stop playing! — tell me what you want *more than anything.*"

"That's easy," she whispered back. "A Blue Gularis." Her fingers stuttered over the keys. "They're rare — they come from the Niger Delta. And they're carnivorous, so I'd need another tank. Momma says *maybe,* if I learn to play the piano. . . ."

"But you don't want to learn the piano. (Scales!)"

"Right." Perhaps the fun wasn't over, after all.

He looked very solemnly at her and patted his huge brown valise.

"Well, then, Sarah," said Mr. Bodega, "would you like to learn Black Magic, instead?"

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And she answered, equally solemnly, "Yes."

Privacy was their first problem. Mrs. Chesley liked to look in, those first few Saturday mornings and Tuesdays after six, and the dismayed expression on Sarah's face was no deterrent. It was Mr. Bodega who showed her how the repetitive playing of Scales — specifically, the striking of a C# rather than a C, every third time — guaranteed that Mrs. Chesley would not only abandon the parlor but would close the big oaken doors. This left most of an hour for the old man to explicate the mystic powers of the moon.

It took a long time to learn. Black Magic was more tedious than Sarah had expected, and more exhausting. Still, she consoled herself, it was better than Piano — and, like Piano, there was the promise of a Blue Gularis at the end of it all.

Mr. Bodega said he was impressed with her progress. The summer had ended; September had passed. . . .Sarah, impatient, asked whether she could begin the Final Exercise now.

Mr. Bodega shook his head. "Almost ready, almost." He withdrew a blue apothecary bottle from his vest pocket, an old medicinal decanter with a prominent pontil mark; Emmeline, Sarah thought idly, would kill for one of those. She was surprised that Mr. Bodega had never yet opened his brown valise, carrying all his supplies in the cavernous lining of his topcoat instead. "Powdered amaranth," he explained.

Her eyes widened. "That means—"

"You still need practice. Better not to begin with a difficult target. Something simpler first."

"Like what?" she asked, meaning: *who?*

"For instance, your father."

"Daddy" She was stricken with doubt.

"Come, come," Mr. Bodega said, stamping his foot. "This is not Piano we're practicing here! This is Black Magic! Do you want your Blue Gularis or don't you?"

"I suppose. . . ."

"Then do as I say." His eyes glittered coldly.

But she could not; not that first night. After the old man took his brown valise and left the house, the task he had assigned her began to seem less like Black Magic and more like Homicide. Besides, what if something went wrong? She was an amateur, after all. Failure would be disastrous. The whole household would know; the Lessons would stop; no Gularis.

She went to bed, frightened, and stayed there.

She might not have attempted it at all if Daddy had not announced over dinner the next day that he would set out on a Foray the following morning. The rain had been prodigious, he said, and there were bound to be Puff-

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balls and Shaggy manes in the woods.

"I won't cook the filthy things," Mrs. Chesley announced.

But it didn't matter to Daddy. The Foray was the thing. He would have to get up early; he wanted to catch the *Coprinae* before they began to deliquesce. Sound sleep necessary to that end tonight, he said brusquely — and a drop of brandy wouldn't hurt.

She recognized her opportunity and grasped it. Daddy went to bed first, of course, bottle in hand. Then Aunt Emmeline. Then Sarah herself went through the motions, feigning sleep until she was certain her mother had retired. Mr. and Mrs. Chesley slept in separate rooms, a custom Sarah understood intuitively and was grateful for.

She crept into her father's room. He had fallen asleep in his clothes. The bottle reclined on the night table. A bound volume of *Mycologia* lay open on his chest. He was snoring, his small rib cage rising and falling.

Now, Sarah thought.

She sprinkled the foul-smelling powders and pronounced the Forbidden Words.

A shudder ran through her father's body.

Terrified, she ran from the room, through the darkened hallway, and back to her own bed, in which she fell promptly asleep.

The morning was difficult.

No one remarked on her father's absence. They assumed he had left on his Foray. Sarah sat restlessly through breakfast, fighting her own impatience. She chewed her food thoughtlessly; it might have been sawdust. Her mother chose to prolong the ordeal with a supererogatory glass of orange juice. "You need the vitamins, Missy."

She drank it as quickly as decorum allowed. "May I be excused?"

"I suppose so."

She ran into the Fish Room.

She was afraid at first that it wouldn't be there, Mr. Bodega had been lying, Daddy really *was* off on a Foray. But no — see! Swimming out from behind the Wild Anacharis!

Anoptichthys jordani: the Blind Cave Fish of Cueva Chica, bred without light for so many generations that its eye sockets were perfectly empty and overgrown with skin.

Pale, delicate, eyeless, it reminded Sarah of a sort of fishy mushroom.

Both Mrs. Chesley and Aunt Emmeline grew nervous when Daddy failed to return from the woods, though they did nothing so rash as telephoning the police; that was not the family way. He would return, or he would not. As time passed, it appeared increasingly likely that he would not.

Sarah herself found it difficult to suppress her elation at the acquisition of the Blind Cave Fish. She found her mother looking at her strangely, spec-

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ulatively — she guessed this was not how a little girl was suppposed to respond to the loss of a parent — but she couldn't help it. She would have been sad, of course, if Daddy had *died*; but in fact he was perfectly safe — to Sarah's mind, much improved. The new specimen was breathtakingly beautiful.

Her mother frightened her by suggesting that perhaps the Piano Lessons weren't such a good idea, after all. "After all, Sarah dear, you've been at it for four months now, and all you can play is Scales — and that not very well."

"No!" Sarah protested. "Scales are the Foundation of Music!"

"It's all very well to have a foundation; presumably, however, one should eventually build on it."

"Mr. Bodega says I'm coming along *very* well."

"Hmm," her mother said. "Hmm, hmm."

It was a setback. They were forced to spend the next several weeks devising a highly toxic version of "Glow, Little Glow Worm" with which to drive Mrs. Chesley from the parlor. It made Sarah all the more impatient to get on with Black Magic.

Aunt Emmeline was next.

Sarah pouted. "I want the Gularis, the Gularis! Besides, I *like* Aunt Emmeline."

"Practice," Mr. Bodega chided. He sat on the piano bench with his valise crouched beside him like an enormous and somnolent pet. Sarah had become increasingly curious about the valise; it seemed to her, in quiet moments, that she could hear a sort of tortured movement inside it, and a faint high-pitched sound of sighing or whispering. But Mr. Bodega would not discuss the valise, which he referred to, primly, as his "Collection."

"Anyway," Sarah said, "Aunt Emmeline's at *least* as difficult. It's not like Daddy, you know. I've seen Aunt Emmeline sleep. It's an old lady's sleep; she wakes up if you breathe hard."

"Then let her be awake!" Mr. Bodega handed her an additional phial of powders. "Use your ingenuity. Nobody promised it would be easy, Sarah."

The phial itself was the salvation —that, and all the other bottles and jars the old man had given her. For months Sarah had been hiding these in a bottom dresser drawer, under a deposit of frocks too small to wear but too expensive to throw away. She had been afraid that Emmeline, habituated to the pursuit of glassware, would sniff them out somehow. Now she divined their special utility.

She waited until her mother was out shopping. The house at such times took on a pervasive stillness, Emmeline being too old, too thin, too self-absorbed to raise much commotion. Sarah found her in the Bottle Room, admiring an array of sky-blue Medicinals.

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"Emmeline?" Sarah stood in the doorway with her hands behind her back.

Her aunt looked up briefly, preoccupied. "Sarah, how nice. Have you come to look at the Roman Bottle again?"

Sarah ignored her. From behind her back she drew forth the first of the phials Mr. Bodega had given her: it was small, cerulean, mysterious.

Emmeline sucked in her breath. Her eyes widened. "Where — where did you get that!"

"Around," Sarah said airily.

"Let me have it! Let me, let me—" Her dry eager hands flew out.

Sarah shrugged and passed over the bottle.

"A Medicinal! And so old. It's free-blown, Sarah! And sheared! It must be, oh, very ancient!" She ran her finger around the lip of the bottle. She uncorked it. She sniffed the stale air inside. Sarah had poured off most of the contents earlier, into a jelly jar — all but a few measured grains, which flew unnoticed into her aunt's dilated nostrils.

"There's more," Sarah said, passing over the others — the miniature Decanters and Dunmores and Demijohns — one at a time. Aunt Emmeline performed the same greedy ritual with each.

"More," she said, intoxicated now, "there *must* be more," but Sarah had run out of bottles; so she said the Forbidden Words instead.

She was grateful her mother was absent. Aunt Emmeline's arms flew out cruciform, sending the sideboard full of Insulators crashing to the floor. She stumbled backward on a flurry of Collaterals. Seven rare Figurals shattered at her feet.

In all this, what interested Sarah most was Emmeline's face: how the eyes widened and separated and became grotesquely round; how the mouth, now suddenly lipless, expanded and thrust forward in an obscene parody of a grin. Her arms, too: how they shrank, fusing, and flapped uselessly at her sides. Sarah fled when Aunt Emmeline began to make dry, gasping noises.

She was downstairs in time to see the fish appear in her tank. It was a *Chandra ranga,* called Glassfish on account of its eerily transparent flesh, and Sarah was very pleased.

Mrs. Chesley grew increasingly nervous after the disappearance of Aunt Emmmeline, and since they were alone in the household, there was no one for her to focus her anxiety upon save her daughter. It was only with the greatest difficulty that Sarah persuaded her mother to pay for the second aquarium, as promised.

"You *did* promise, Momma. You said if I took Lessons—"

"Yes, yes. Very well. Have the nasty device, then."

It was was a fine, bright, glass-walled tank. Its aerators gleamed and

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bubbled in a confidence-inspiring fashion. Sarah lined the bottom with white gravel and planted it artfully with Water Wisteria and Parrot's Feather. The finished effect was quite lovely.

"There are no fish, " her mother observed.

"I'm saving the tank for a very *special* fish," Sarah said. In her other, older, tank, the Cave Fish of Cueva Chica cruised sightlessly and the Glassfish hid behind the plants.

Her mother's scrutiny intensified. She insisted on sitting through three consecutive Lessons, her eyes sometimes on Sarah but more often and more intently on Mr. Bodega and his huge brown valise. If this kept up, Sarah thought with desperation, she might actually be forced to learn the piano.

But Mrs. Chesley was called away one Tuesday evening early in winter to see the Executor of the Estate, and Mr. Bodega got down to business.

"You've done very well so far." He studied her intently. "You've been a good pupil, Sarah. One of the best. Time now for the graduation exercise." He withdrew from his cavernous black topcoat the final bottle, the last barrier between herself and the Blue Gularis.

But he pulled it back. "This is not to be undertaken lightly! You've been lucky; you are not infallible. Your mother is a formidable target. One slip, and the game is lost. Do you understand?"

"Yes!"

He smiled. "Then bide your time." He handed her the bottle. "Caution —and when you stride, speed."

But as it turned out, there was no time for caution and no opportunity for speed.

Her mother arrived home hours after Mr. Bodega had taken up his valise and lurched away. She slammed the front door. Sarah, who had been half-dozing at the kitchen table, sat upright. Door slamming! She was scandalized, astonished. This was not a household in which doors were slammed.

Her mother's feet thundered up the stairs, and then — worse! —there was the unprecedented sound of shattering glass and splintering wood. Trembling, Sarah ran up after.

The noise was coming from the Mushroom Room.

Her mother, red-cheeked and hissing, wielded a tatty broom handle as if it were a war ax. Sarah gazed in mute dismay at the bookshelves, which lay in ruins. Tattered pages sifted down like snow or ash. A display case shattered, lofting up a choking miasma of powdered spores.

"Momma!"

Mrs. Chesley continued about her violent work. "Don't speak to me, Missy! You're one of *them,* oh yes! Born a Chesley with their damn lazy ways—!"

Slash.

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Sarah recalled that her mother had gone to see the Executor.

"Momma, what happened?"

"'—a slight *irregularity,*' he says; 'we regret to *inform* you,' he says! Hah! Frittered away the entire fortune, your father did — *and* his luckless sister — and now I can't even get what's left because he's gone and wandered off somewhere!"

"Momma, his Mushrooms!"

"I'm doing nothing more than I should have done long ago, Sarah dear!" *Slash*: dried specimens tumbled across the carpet, disintegrating. Sarah, wide-eyed, stifled a sneeze. "Spending what was by rights *my* money on these shiftless hobbies! That goes for Emmeline's Bottles, as well — and your Fish, Missy; oh, yes, don't think I've left *you* out!"

The Fish! Sarah was panic-stricken. She imagined her mother, plainly crazed, shattering the aquariums with that ugly broomstick. Oh, the Angelfish, the Tiger Barbs, the Banded Leporiums! Not to mention her newer and even more precious specimens!

Gasping, she ran back to her room. She gathered all the specifics Mr. Bodega had left her and measured them out with shaking hands. The torrent of destruction continued unabated down the hall. She uncorked, at last, the final bottle. Its contents were bitter, astringent; their pungency filled the room.

She picked up the potion in its bowl and ran into the hallway.

Her mother had finished with the Mushroom Room and was striding toward the Bottle Room.

The situation demanded precisely what Sarah had hoped at all costs to avoid: a frontal attack.

Mrs. Chesley threw open the door of the Bottle Room. Sarah had cleaned up after Aunt Emmeline's unfortunate convulsions; the thinning was not appreciable. Mrs. Chesley's eyes gleamed as she raised the broomstick: clearly, this was an ambition long postponed.

Sarah flung a sticky handful of the Potion onto her mother's broad back, where it infiltrated her imported silk blouse.

Mrs. Chesley whirled, enraged.

Sarah stiffened. She closed her eyes tightly and began to pronounce the Forbidden Words.

A thick hand clasped itself over her mouth.

"Blasphemy!" Mrs. Chesley cried. "I won't hear blasphemy from you, my girl!"

Sarah mumbled against the pressure of her mother's huge palm, but it was no good: the Words must be coherently Pronounced. She felt herself dragged backward, down the hallway, toward the stairs; heard her mother unlatch the door of the linen closet.

"In you go, Missy! When you're ready to apologize, knock — but not before! — and maybe I'll *think* about letting you out."

She was thrust into the damp-

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smelling closet. The door thudded shut behind her.

It was one of Sarah's secret phobias: the fear of being confined in a dark space.

She began to pronounce the Words again — then thought better of it, clamping her own hand over her mouth. Did she want to be locked in here *forever?*

"Momma, I'm sorry! I won't do it again, *I'm sorry—"*

Too late. There was the sound of breaking glass from the Bottle Room. Chestnut Flasks, brittle blue Carboys, Commemorative Piece Molds, ice-thin Hogarths — oh, it took quite a while.

Mrs. Chesley hesitated on her way from the Bottle Room to the stairs. The broomstick in her hand was nicked and chipped. Shards of glass had opened small cuts in her forearms; Mrs. Chesley in her rage had not yet noticed.

Almost done. But she was tired now.

She heard a faint knocking from the linen closet door.

Sarah! She had almost forgotten about Sarah.

"Momma?" The voice sounded faint, chastened.

"Is that you, Missy?"

"I'm sorry for what I did."

"That's easy to *say,* dear. . . ."

"It's true! I am, really!"

Mrs. Chesley sighed.

"No more blasphemy?"

"No!"

"No more tricks?"

"I promise!"

Her hand hovered at the latch.

"It makes no difference about the Fish, you know! They're still going! No more Chesley madness for you!"

"I know. Kill . . . kill the fish if you have to. I don't care."

She sounded so meek. . . .

Mrs. Chesley turned the key in the closet door.

The Forbidden Words came spilling out.

Sarah was immensely happy — at first — with her new Blue Gularis.

Tiger-striped, shovel-mouthed, a vigorous swimmer, it was also abnormally large for its species. It seemed crowded even alone in the larger aquarium, turning itself in nervous figure-eights. Its diaphanous fins twitched among the Water Wisteria.

Big, beautiful . . . and carnivorous.

What was she going to feed it?

She was weeping when Mr. Bodega arrived the next Saturday morning. He settled his enormous valise carefully in the foyer and looked at Sarah sternly.

"There now. You're an attractive girl, Sarah; don't make yourself ugly with tears. Tell me what happened."

Sarah explained about the fight with her mother, the Forbidden Words. "But then I said them, and she, she—!"

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"So you have your Blue Gularis. And we're alone now? Quite alone?"

"Alone, yes. That's the problem! I didn't know how to get any — and when I was asleep it *jumped,* it *jumped,* Mr. Bodega, into the next tank — and they're gone now, all gone, the Angelfish, the Tiger Barbs, the Banded Leporinus! *And* the Blind Cave Fish of Cueva Chica, *and* the Glassfish!"

"Tragic, of course," said Mr. Bodega — peering now over his left shoulder, now over his right — "but what do you expect me to do about it?"

"I thought — perhaps — if you had some sort of Black Magic. . . ."

"Oh, but I do. I do have some sort of Black Magic."

He reached for his valise.

"The Collection!" Sarah cried, brightening; then: "Do I get to see it now?"

"Yes, now," said Mr. Bodega. The latches clicked, the valise fell open. Sarah was astonished, then dismayed, at what she saw: strapped against the side, meticulously arranged — shrunken, but immaculate, and dressed in identical yellow doll dresses — a perfect bevy of Little Girls.

Coming soon

Next month: "Pira," an unusual and compelling new fantasy novelet by Brad Strickland, along with SF from Joe Hensley, Ron Goulart, Richard Mueller and others.

Harlan Ellison's column (part 2 of his "Dune" essay) arrived too late to make this issue but will definitely be included next month.

Soon: stories by Orson Scott Card, James Tiptree, Jr., Robert F. Young, Charles L. Grant, Richard Cowper, Keith Roberts, Fred Saberhagen and many others.

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This new story by Ian Watson — in which Benny and Nance come out of the closet to wear animal skins — concerns the idea of regulating peoples' obssessions...

Skin Day, And After

BY
IAN WATSON

Nance stirred and yawned.

"What day is it, Benny?"

What a little-girl question! I don't mean that my Nance *looked* anything like a little girl as she lay sprawled in the sheets with her red hair setting the pillow afire. But it was a seven- or eight-year-old's kind of question. You know, when they've been counting the days till their birthday or some treat? They know what day it is, all right, but they need to be told just to put the icing on the cake.

I stooped over her and whispered, "It's Skin Day, Nance."

And she opened her eyes wide and sat straight up.

"Watch out — we'd better get moving! I'm going to wear my seal-skin bra and my leopard-skin pillbox hat. And, oh, the ocelot stole! And of course that neat little lambskin muff. And the tail, the tail! The Bengal tiger tail, springing out behind me!" She flexed her fingers, feline fashion.

"Hey, no hurry. No one'll be on the streets yet. Let's fix some De-caff and boil an Urf." I hurried off to the kitched area, flipping on the TV en route, and spooned a good helping of De-caff into the pot, then popped a couple of Urfs in a pan on the back burner.

Actually I was beginning to prefer Urfs to real eggs, even though I was a registered Carnivore myself. I'd been getting dissatisfied with the Bootleggs we bought now and then. Too many real eggs had those gluey jelly bits in them that stuck to your teeth, and the yolks were generally paler and smaller than the synthetic sort. Since an egg wasn't really meat, I didn't see that any particular principle was involved; an egg, a philosopher might have said, is not a chicken. Still, a Carnivore had

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to watch out for his frontiers being eroded, so I did still fork out a dollar each for a Bootlegg occasionally. If no eggs got laid, after all, where would the chickens come from?

But anyway, it was Urfs for breakfast this particular Skin Day morning. Nance never did put her name down as a Carnivore, so I didn't feel as though I were shortchanging her. She would join me in a steak, to be companionable; but always she would want hers well done, not rare and bloody the way it ought to be. Personally I was a Carnivore, and Smoker, and Anti-Kids, and Anti-Nuke, the max you could sign up for. Nance was only Skins, and Save the Rain Forests (I suppose because jaguars breed there) and Smoker (too), but she seemed happy enough with her trio. We got on well together, especially on Smoking Day.

Anyhow, Nance was in the shower by now, where I could hear her stinging herself all pink and fresh so that she could really revel in the touch of those animal skins.

And the pre-News commercials were on.

"Cherchez le Obster! Five-star flavour. Five-star texture. But nobody boiled it alive! Nobody made it scream! Remember: le Obster!"

This annoyed me quite a bit: all these snippets of bastard French that the synth-food biz was laying on us. What was it last week? *Burf*: the latest false beef. It sounded like somebody belching. We weren't all *that* close to the Quebec border. I guess the manufacturers thought this added a swanky touch of gastronomy.

I was wondering whether to cancel my Anti-Kid registration and sign up as an Anglo-Saxon Supremacist instead. Then I could shoot up to Montreal on a day trip and wander round insulting everyone by speaking English. But presumably half of Canada would be doing that on the day, so I just wouldn't stand out in the crowd. And that wasn't the point of special days at all, at least not to my way of thinking.

Anyway, the pot of De-caff boiled just then, and so did the Urfs. I fixed some toast and cut it into fingers to dip with, the way Nance liked it. "Soldiers," she called them. She'd been Anti-Military before she switched to Save the Rain Forests, and she enjoyed biting soldiers' heads off. I took our breakfast through to the other room just as the News was starting — and as Nance emerged from the shower wrapped in her towel.

"Hi there, citizens. This is Cal Garrison, and today's Skin Day, so just you watch out for all those Paleolithic types wearing their cavemen clothes—"

Nance pouted. "What a nerve. He's got no *concept* of elegance. Just look how he's dressed: T-shirt and jeans."

"Yes, folks, it isn't exactly Nature-Hating Day, but it's the next best thing — for those who can afford it. And as I

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see it, only the stinking rich can doll up in animal skins —"

"That just isn't true," she said. "Why, that ocelot stole I picked up was an absolute —"

"I mean, any citizen can go trample the flowers in a park —"

"He's just trying to whip up feeling," I pointed out mildly, "so the day'll really shine."

"— all the cruel exploiters of lovely furry animals, who think God's creatures are put on earth for us to *adorn* ourselves. All the rare tigers in the forests of the night and the noble Polar bears and cuddly seal pups and hoppity bunny rabbits—"

"I just love furry animals," said Nance, stroking her hands luxuriously down her thighs in anticipation.

"I love animals, too," I said. "I love eating them."

"Well, citizens, let's have some footage from yesterday before we turn to the murky old international scene, eh? And what was yesterday? It was Wino Day, with all the drunks and lushes out abusing sober people—"

We didn't pay a lot of attention to the film footage, since we were busy with our Urfs.

". . . and the good old Social Tension Rating is computed down to 400 overnight—"

"Hey," said Nance, "it hasn't been that low since Anti-Nigra Day."

I pushed my empty Urf aside and made the familiar motion of a couple of parted fingers to my lips. Nance nodded, so I fetched the pack of cigarettes; you could hardly read the brand name any longer for the health warnings. I stuck a token in the wall slot to switch off the apartment's smoke alarms for the next fifteen minutes, and we lit up. There were only another four cigarettes left in the pack, so we wouldn't be lighting another couple. Sure, we had half a carton each stashed away, but we were hoping to save three packs each for Smoking Day. At twenty dollars a pack — and that was with the tax deductions for registered Smokers — you tended to go easy.

Nance puffed hers right down to the filter, crushed this out, and rose dramatically.

"Now," she announced, and marched to her wardrobe, dropping her towel negligently on the floor behind her. I picked it up and hung it on a chair back. This was all part of the ritual.

Of course, most of the days we weren't registered for we didn't bother about too much. Not to the extent of going out of our way to do anything.

Some we did. Veg Day, for instance, when all the Vegetarians picnicked on the grass in the park (like Herbivores, right), and bust into decent licensed Carnivore restaurants demanding algae soup and nut cutlets. We'd hoot and jeer then.

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And Doggy Day, too, when all the proud owners let their pets off the leash to defecate anywhere. Nance always worked herself into a froth about that. She would run up to dog owners whose Fido had just dropped a load in the playpit in the park and scream in their faces, "Do you realize a child's hands could touch that, and it'd *go blind*?" That was her favorite gambit. Usually they'd scream back that this was nothing compared to what they did on Anti-Kid Day. A lot that worried Nance, with me being Anti-Kid myself. But generally she got a good verbal fight going, and that made the doggy-walkers happy, too, as they thought they were offending her. All very therapeutic.

But days like Gerry Day we sort of ignored; and a lot of old folks often stayed indoors, too, though you did get the old pack of militant grandmas and grandpas tripping you with their walking sticks and hauling youngsters out of the seats on the bus, and such.

And Yid Day, too. Why should I bother sticking on a swastika badge and chanting "Judenraus!" till I was hoarse outside some kosher butcher's window, so that he could rush outside brandishing his Star of David at me, bellowing, "Oy Vey!"?

And I felt that some of the days were a bit, well, puny; though I guess those who registered for them, and those whom they rubbed up the wrong way, felt otherwise. Obesity Day, Sci-Fi Day. Who cared?

• • •

Nance looked stunning in her mink jacket, leopard-skin hat and real leather skirt and boots. She'd decided against the lambskin muff in favor of the kidskin gloves, trimmed with zebra; and against the ocelot stole in favor of a gorgeous red fox-fur draped round her shoulders with the head (with black glass button eyes) hanging down one side and the bushy tail the other. It really blended with her hair. She'd scrapped the idea of the tiger tail, too. In her right hand she swung a crocodile-skin bag. Perfection. She was dandy.

I wore my ordinary denims, of course.

And out we went: along to the elevator, down to the lobby with its jungle of swiss cheese plants, and through the auto-security checkout into the street. Clancy Avenue, actually. You know, six blocks north of Jefferson Park, and the zoo, ten blocks west of downtown.

"Where'll we go, then, Nance?"

"You *know*, Benny."

"Zoo?"

She nodded intently.

Of course. As usual. The zoo. Where better to parade her costume? People who loved animals — *au naturel*, as the Macrobiotics mob say — would be flocking to the zoo, ready to take offense.

Still, first we had to get there. And certain adventures happened en route. (Damn all this French. Long

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live the English language, pure and unpolluted.)

First we hailed a cab, but that didn't work out. The first couple of drivers pulled over and foul-mouthed Nance, then zoomed off, burning rubber and leaving us in a cloud of fumes; which takes some doing with exhaust-emission filters fitted, but they managed it. Though not before Nance treated them to some choice invective of her own.

So we set off to walk the six blocks. Next thing, as we were passing a Gay Veganburger bar, out popped a shaven-headed Buddhist monk in saffron robes and rope sandals. He was thumping a little drum; and like an Ancient Mariner, he homed in. He stank of patchouli.

"I pray for their souls," he wailed, tagging along with us, "that they are at peace."

"Whose souls? Ours?" said I. Some people tended to talk about you in the third person if they didn't want any direct interpersonal interaction but still felt bound to make an observation .

"The souls of all the slaughtered beasts." And he chanted on, in Sanskrit or Tibetan or something, noisily banging that drum near our ears.

"You can bet they're at peace," shouted Nance. "Which is more than I can say of anyone in your vicinity, you clown! What are you, the answer to dandruff?"

I frowned. This wasn't quite high-class stuff, such as I expected of Nance. I think the monk had thrown her a bit; and that wouldn't do at all.

"Om, om, om, on," he droned composedly, accompanying us.

Oh, yes, I got it now. The monk was laying his own public nuisance on us even though it wasn't Hare Krishna Day. He was latching onto us. And he was upstaging Nance. But she couldn't really say so, not herself. So I said it for her.

"Push off, buster. You're poaching. I'll file a complaint. I will, too! You'll be deregistered."

That got rid of him, but not as satisfactorily as if Nance had lipped him off herself. She looked a mite resentful, but cheered up when a doggy-walker steered her couple of leashed, muzzled poodles in our path, and at the same time a doting mother swung her twin buggy of brats to block us. Of course the first woman was impeded not only by her poodles but also by her sack: containing canine excrement shovel, plastic bags, and sterilizing spray cans — and the mother by a bag of veg unbalancing the buggy. So they would be a push-over.

At the sight of Nance's furs and leather, the doggy-walker went white-lipped.

"You . . . demon woman!" she shrilled. "God bless all living creatures." As though Nance had sacrificed that fox to Satan and drunk the animal's blood.

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"Well, these ones are *dead* —"

But Nance hardly had a chance to get in with her riposte when both poodles leaped up at the buggy and slobbered through their muzzles all over over the toddlers.

"Toxicara virus!" the incensed mother cried in horror, like some plague victim ringing her bell and shouting, "Unclean!"

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" exclaimed the doggy-walker. Quickly she whipped a spray can out of her sack. "Close your eyes, little darlings," she cooed, and promptly squirted their faces and hands. And of course the brats began to scream. Immediately Nance announced loudly to all and sundry, "Just listen to that noise! It's bursting my ear drums. I declare, it must be ninety decibels." The mother naturally had to clap a hand (two hands actually) over their little mouths; and their faces went bright red — and with both her hands off, the buggy tipped backward, spilling artichokes and chicory along the sidewalk. Excitedly the poodles begann leaping again. Oh, it was precious. Laughing triumphantly and flicking her fox fur about, Nance steered deftly between this Scylla and Charybdis.

And then after that . . . but you don't want me gabbing on about every little encounter on the way. You want to hear about the zoo. That's where you'd expect the real collisions on a day like this. The real catharsis, as the old Greeks used to say. The true satisfaction: to know you were doing your bit toward a sane society.

That's the whole point of it, after all. Think of society as a roomful of balloons. They're all trying to inflate at the same time in a finite space. So each balloon is trying to squash its neighbors flat. And of course if one balloon expands *too* much, it goes pop. That's messy. It costs, to clean up. But balloons like to expand; it's their nature. So what do you do? You build in special days for certain *classes* of balloon to expand, and special days for other classes to be squeezed. Usually both at the same time. And the psych-pollsters watch over it all with their Social Tension Ratings. Simple.

That's called an analogy.

Though maybe it isn't the right one.

Anyway . . . the zoo.

We arrived at the gates, and got in with only a few hisses and whistles. No one was actively picketing; not at the gates.

"Polar bears, Nance?"

"No, *cats*. The Big Cats."

There were quite a few Monitor Cops about, as you'd expect on Skin Day at a venue where some fine skins are in residence (as yet still filled with bodies); and one of these promptly made a beeline for us. I thought this was distinctly fussy of him, but then he was obviously a rookie — fresh-faced and young.

"Morning, ma'am. May I see your

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registration card."

"Hey," I said, "do you think she'd be all dolled up like this if she weren't kosher?"

The rookie eyed me. "You got your days mixed up?"

"It's O.K., Benny." Nance pulled her card from the crocodile bag.

The rookie scrutinized it for quite a while, as if he had some literacy problem, while we fretted and chafed at the bit. Finally he handed it back, and stared contemptuously up and down Nance's attire from head to foot. You've heard of people's lips curling? Never seen it before, myself; but his lip curled. He said nothing; but still I wasn't taking *that*.

"Hey, you got something personal about skins? Because if so, you oughtn't to be on duty today."

At this the rookie's Adam apple bobbed a few times as though he had something stuck in his craw.

"C'mon, Nance." And we walked off. Past the spider monkeys and along by the cockatoos. I couldn't decide whether the encounter was a plus or not.

"Feather boas," murmured Nance, slightly distressed — though off at a tangent to the probable cause. "Bird of paradise hats. . . ."

I chuckled. "And a morpho butterfly pinned in your buttonhole? Those don't go with fox and mink and leather."

"Suppose not."

"Nance, you're fabulous today. That guy wasn't offing your taste."

"You sure?"

"Cross my heart. Let's get along" — and I nudged her — "to the catwalk." And we both burst out laughing, and linked arms and stepped out down Penguin Terrace.

Down by the tiger compound, there was an Animal Lib picket, because naturally it was their day, too, in a way. In an inverted "squeeze" way. A couple of placards waved lamely, protesting at how all the beasts were imprisoned; and as part of the act, they had a homemade bamboo cage with a guy in it dressed in a business suit, looking puzzled and occasionally shaking the bamboo bars, though not too strenuously in case they fell apart. HOW WOULD YOU LIKE IT? read a sign on top. But it was all lackluster, till Nance swanked up. Then they really gave tongue.

A fat young woman with greasy hair waddled forth. She jabbed a chubby finger at Nance's fox-fur.

"I wanna buy that," she said furiously, brandishing a few moth-eaten dollar bills. "I wanna buy it and *burn* it."

"Do you, now?" said Nance. "With so much insulation, you feel *cold?* You got the wrong day, baby: you want Obesity Day."

"You must think you're pretty ugly youself, lady," a thin man called out "needing to drape yourself in that lot

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before you dare show your face."

"Go play with a tiger, Androcles," retorted Nance.

"I ought to have worn the tail," she whispered.

"I got a real Bengal tiger's tail at home," she proclaimed aloud. "Shot it myself, on safari. Trouble was, I used an elephant gun by mistake so I blew the skin to pieces. But I kept the tail. And the cubs. I had one of them stuffed, and I use the other as a night-dress case." (All lies, of course. The closest Nance had been to India was a restaurant.) "That's real cuddly in bed."

"Bitch!" screamed the fat woman.

This was all shaping up quite well, and I noticed a Monitor idling nearby, nodding his head as if racking up points while keeping a note that there weren't any fouls, such as actual assault and violence. We'd gathered ourselves a sizable audience, too.

But just then . . . all eyes sort of drifted away from Nance.

For this incredible dude came strolling along.

A leopard: he was a leopard! By which I don't mean that he was wearing leopard-skin *clothes*. Oh, no, he was wearing an actual leopard — or at least it looked that way. But maybe it was two leopards cunningly joined together. I didn't think, even if you stretched it, a single leopard could fit so tall a man (though maybe I was wrong). And was he tall. Six six, like a basketball ace. And black. He wore that leopard as if it were his own skin. He had clawed pads on his feet; and his hands were clawed paws. And the head! His own head was squeezed inside the leopard head, which was split open with the upper row of teeth creasing his brow and the lower row his chin. And a leopard tail jutted out ramrod-stiff behind him.

"Ohmygosh," said Nance.

The ace flexed his claws and snarled, showing his own ivories within that larger frame of leopard teeth, like a mouth within a mouth.

I could see a zipper up the front of the leopard, but that didn't diminish anything.

"Hi there," he said to Nance, acknowledging a fellow skin buff, while the Animal Libbers generally cowered away, appalled beyond appall (to put it poetically). He poised on the balls of his padded feet, leaning slightly forward.

"Skins and Smokes," he said.

"Smokes and Rain Forests," she replied.

"Wow-ee!" exclaimed this dude. "Jaguars and Jivaro."

"Shrunken heads and orchids!"

"El Dorado and anacondas!"

"Lianas and hummingbirds!"

"I didn't know that any leopards came from South America," I butted in.

But they ignored me, enchanted. They didn't care. Or maybe this dude just hadn't been able to lay hands on a jaguar or two. Or maybe this was his

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ancestral tribal costume from Africa, though he really hankered to roam rain forests, not savannas. . . .

"Piranhas and rubber trees," he said.

"Sloths and amethysts!" And Nance reached to stroke his fur. Most sensuously. Now I knew that it was her day; but even so.

"Hey," said I.

Right then the Animal Libbers rallied. "Slaying and flaying!" they began raving. "Blood and bludgeoning! Slaughtering and torturing!" And the guy in the business suit capered and gibbered behind the bamboo bars.

"Let's split," suggested the leopard dude to Nance.

She winked, "Macaws and chewing gum, eh?"

"Tapir and bananas." He draped a leopard's paw across her shoulder.

"Hey!" I repeated, over the din. And Nance just looked at me as if I were a stranger.

No, not quite a stranger. Not yet. "Amazon swordtails *and* —?" she inquired.

I racked my brains. But I couldn't think. I couldn't talk this mystic language.

"And?" she prompted.

I shook my head. Then had second thoughts. "And Inca gold?"

"Oh, *man*," said the leopard derisively. "We've had El Dorado." And he drew Nance away with him. And away Nance went.

Since, of course I (in my denims) was nothing to take offense at, the hubbub subsided. Forlorn, I stood in a pool of silence, watching that spotted beast with the long stiff tail lead my lady off, the two of them still exchanging phrases in secret code. Like a pair of spies who had come together at long last and successfully matched the torn halves of a dollar bill.

So that's the story of how I lost my Nance on Skin Day.

For a time I thought of registering as Skins myself, to try to win her back. But frankly, I couldn't see myself in furs. Anyway, it wasn't really the Skins that had lost her to me. It was the Rain Forests. And no again: it wasn't really even the Rain Forests.

It was that dialogue they had fallen into so snappily — just like two halves of the same person who had been hunting for each other ever since the world began.

And I wasn't Nance's other half. He was. She had known this immediately. Instinctively.

It's as if by slicing up the year into special days of obsession, for the social good, people, too, have been sliced up in the process. Sliced up, shortly to be recombined. Like DNA. (That's an analogy.) The slicing-up time is coming to an end; the time of recombination is just around the corner.

The day before yesterday, I spied an encounter in the street that sent a shiver down my spine.

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Between a young Puerto Rican lad and a middle-aged middle-class white woman. (It was Abortion Day, by the way.) He stepped right in her path and said, "Peyote and peace pipes."

And she replied, "Teepees and tomahawks."

"Buffalo and adobes!"

"Sitting Bull and moccasins!"

"Wampum and totem poles!"

And they strolled on together arm in arm, sweet as you please.

Then yesterday (which was Porn Day) I noted a skinny girl in biker gear rush up to a crew-cut military type and hail him with, "Legions and aqueducts!"

To which he replied, quick as can be, "Orgies and togas."

So that's the way it is. Or will be within another few months. The whole country is shaking itself out, and folding itself a different way.

And somewhere out there my soulmate is longing for me. And I for her, or him.

It could be you. Couldn't it?

Just let me try you out. Please.

"Chartreuse and truffles?

"Bardot and guillotines?

"Bonbons and tricolors?"

I'm waiting.

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Rolaine Hochstein is married, lives in New Jersey and is a recipient of a New Jersey State Council on the Arts Fellowship for 1985. She has published many stories and articles; her most recent novel is TABLE 47 (Doubleday 1983). This is her first appearance in F&SF.

Neighbors

BY
ROLAINE HOCHSTEIN

We never saw much of the people next door. The heel of a polished shoe as he closed the door behind him. Her manicured hand taking in a package. Corners of coats, diminishing fragments as the elevator doors came together. The city is famous for that.

Their apartment was identical to ours except that their bathroom and bedroom were to the left of their living room and their efficiency kitchen was to the right of their entrance foyer. We saw their apartment — or, rather, its clone on one of the other floors — before we moved in. All the apartments in the up-and-down lines are exactly the same.

We were happy not to know them, and they must have felt the same way. Otherwise, in all those years of comings and goings, we could hardly have missed bumping into each other — at least one of us, at some time, into one of them. Their door was adjacent to ours, and the life they lived — husband and wife, out to work in the morning and back in time for supper — was just like our life. Missing one another so regularly had to be more than coincidence.

It was clear from what they threw out, at least in the beginning, that our neighbors were a very refined couple. We used the same incinerator chute. The door to the incinerator room across the hall made the head of a skinny triangle, with our doors as the equidistant legs. The day we moved in, my husband brought over a bag of garbage and came back with a stack of softcover mysteries. "Guy next door," Frank said, "threw out all these Travis McGee's." Frank was as tickled as if he'd caught an eel. His friend McGonigle at the printing plant

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was a Travis McGee freak. Frank thought he'd see what it was all about. He laid himself out on the convertible sofa and all of a sudden he was reading. It was the first night since our honeymoon that he didn't turn on the television. I didn't want to disturb him, so decided to bake a cake, even though I hadn't been any kind of a cook before then. All because of our neighbors' garbage. It was close to midnight when the cake was done, and Frank said I'd be too tired to get up for work. But I felt full of pep, and I even got him to come downstairs with me to buy a pint of rum to soak the cake with.

We just about gave up TV after that. Frank ate up the mysteries, which he'd finish at one sitting and next day pass over to McGonigle at the plant. We kept on the alert. We'd hear the neighbors' door open, then the door to the incinerator room, the closing of the incinerator door, then the apartment door. We'd wait a polite couple of minutes, and then one of us would go out with some little garbage of ours. Messy stuff went down the chute. Bottles were boxed for recycling. Papers and magazines were piled on the floor. Our neighbors subscribed to good magazines. I found some things to read in the *Atlantic,* and Frank soon got hooked on *Psychology Today.* A few months after we moved in, the neighbors must have cleaned house, because they got rid of a couple years' collection of *Gourmet* magazine, full of fantastic recipes. Ordinarily I'd have taken a quick look, maybe cut out a few recipes and filed them in my never-never box. But Frank had fallen under the influence of systems psychology, and he said people should say yes to themselves. If I had a cooking urge, he said, I should act it out. So I acted. Beef Wellington. Veal Prince Orloff. Lemon soufflé. He said yes to big portions.

We put on weight. We needed exercise to work it off, so Frank bought us a couple of bicycles. Serviceable three-speed models. We kept them locked in a rack in the basement. The rack slots were identified by apartment numbers. Our neighbors — though we had an idea they were quite a bit older than we — also had a pair of bicycles — lightweight European ten-speeds in the two racks beside ours. It was funny. We knew so much about them, but we didn't know their name. Everything in that building was by apartment number: bike racks, storage bins, mailboxes, even doorbells. And there was never a name on their things that we found in the incinerator room. The address was torn off delivery boxes and neatly cut out of magazines.

My name is Arden Nessor. I used to work at the midtown office of the General Public Loan Company. It was a job I got right out of high school, thinking I'd go on to night school to

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learn a special skill. Instead I met Frank and got married. Frank made good money as a lithographer in the printing shop where he still works. I thought we'd have a houseful of kids, so I didn't worry about going to school any more. After a few years of nothing happening, I thought I'd ask a doctor, but Frank said he liked things as they were. If I mentioned it again, he'd say he was getting too old to start running after kids. Frank and I were comfortable together. By then I was head cashier with a lot of responsibility and good pay. No reason to change.

My job was like a circus. The customers had to come in every week to pay back on their loans. We had all kinds — shabby, fancy, ashamed, cocky. We had women in mink coats. We even had a television announcer whom we tactfully pretended not to recognize. He was one who had stamped on his passbook in red ink: NO MAIL TO HOME ADDRESS. But he was there every week, so that no mail had to go anywhere. Mr. Joffrey said those red-ink ones were the ones who kept girlfriends on the side. Mr. Joffrey said he never had any trouble getting them to pay up.

Mr. Joffrey was in charge of collections. He had a big nose, muddy blue eyes and kinky gray hair. He had an office in the back, with its own exit so that customers couldn't see him. So then, when he'd come to their house saying he was a delivery man, they'd let him in and he could start to threaten them. Sometimes, after office hours, Mr. Joffrey would come out of his office laughing so hard you couldn't see his eyes. "I ought to go on the stage," he'd say, choking on his laughter, holding himself to keep his ribs from splitting. He was very strong. He'd come back from house calls with stories about kicking doors down. He talked tough, but he was always nice to the cashiers.

Mr. Barlow was just the opposite. He was round and red-faced, with weak little arms under his light-colored coat sleeves. He was the office manager, with a big polished desk, up in front with his door wide open until he closed it on a customer. We had a subfloor suite, and Mr. Barlow's back wall was painted with a mountain view so customers would think they had a window to look out of while they were talking to him about taking out a loan. Mr. Barlow looked jovial with his colorful necktie and his suit buttoned over his belly as he held the door for a lady or walked a man out to the elevator with an arm around his shoulder. But he never had anything pleasant to say to us girls. He just sat at his desk and scowled. He smiled only at customers. When they got down to owing only twenty dollars, we had to send them into Mr. Barlow so he could talk them into borrowing more.

A cashier had to make up the difference if her drawer didn't tally at the end of the day. Once I was short $7.49. I was saving for my living room

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sofa and was sick about losing that money. After that I sweated when I counted my cash. A few years later Mr. Barlow said I didn't have to make up shortages anymore. He was a fair boss. When the head cashier retired, I was the one with seniority and I got her job.

Some nights after supper Frank and I would go out to a movie. Sundays we'd take a long bus ride to visit my folks or Frank's father, who lived with Frank's sister. Looking back, it doesn't seem like much, but I know I was happy then. Frank says he was happy too.

Our next-door neighbors were politically active. At least, interested. They got a lot of newsletters, announcements, and fund-raising appeals from different organizations. Frank brought them in with the magazines. I started to read about the American Civil Liberties Union, Amnesty International. I found out about consumer protection. I started thinking about the loan business and how the interest we charged compared with the interest a bank charged. I asked Mr. Joffrey if it was legal to take money out of people's pay before they got it. Mr. Joffrey beat on his desk. Tears came out of where his eyes had gone. "Don't ask the customers," he said when he stopped laughing.

Frank got interested in a bulletin from the Museum of Natural History, and he started to take nature walks across the river. He bought binoculars. I said he should feel free to go without me. Systems psychology says people in a marriage should be individuals first. I joined a Neighborhood Action Group. We met on Wednesday nights, but there was work all the time. Frank didn't mind staying home. Frank liked jazz. John Coltrane. The Duke.

We were into elegant dinners by then. Those neighbors had never steered us wrong. Frank paid attention to the labels on their discarded wine bottles. One of their favorites, Gevrey Chambertin, proved to be soft and dry, just to our taste — provided, of course, we got the right year and estate. With the prospect of good food and wine, we took to late dinners to make time for proper preparation. We both cooked. I often set a table at the window end of the living room. I picked up some homespun linen cloths at a little Irish import shop. We had candlelight.

Frank had latent artistic talent, probably what had turned him to the printing trade in the first place. He needed a creative outlet to use his time productively while I was at meetings or aerobics class. He took up calligraphy, and was so good at it that soon he was off the machines and into hand printing, which was coming into style again. Frank had to

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start wearing suits and ties to work, as he was often called upon to meet clients and discuss their design requirements. We knew where to shop from the logos on our neighbors' discarded boxes: Rogers Peet, Brooks Brothers, Lord & Taylor. Frank and I enjoyed the more fashionable shops, the quality and personal service. But dressing up made us want to look trimmer: we joined a health club with hot tubs and sauna, and resolved to work out regularly.

Suddenly I was terribly busy. Politics, sports, classes in ethnic cooking and (when I could find a minute) macramé. Sometimes Frank and I would meet after work for dinner and theater but we were chiefly caught up in redoing our apartment. I'd found a wonderful Yugoslav who wove custom carpets, and just down the street from him, one lunch hour, I almost fell into a tiny shop where they'd make a perfectly beautiful marble top for any piece of furniture you wanted to cover. My job had grown increasingly hateful as I'd grown increasingly aware of its exploitative nature. I stayed on only from habit, managing to separate my feelings from my activities. Like a surgeon who thinks of his patients as a lung or an appendix, I thought of my unfortunate clients only as passbooks.

One customer broke this spell. If not for Nedra Rossen, I might be working there still.

She was a well-dressed woman, though perhaps too carefully so. Her silk scarf was too carefully draped about the neckline of her suit, which was too carefully buttoned through buttonholes shiny from long wear, as were her collar and cuffs. Her fine leather shoes had been painstakingly polished to cover the scuff marks. I don't know what made me examine her so closely, but I felt the terrible effort she made to maintain her bearing as she entered the office and took her place in the line at my window. I tried to remain impersonal. "Name?"

"Nedra Rossen" meant nothing to me then. Underneath her tastefully made up face were eyes that destroyed me. Never mind the color. They were bright, penetrating, and desperate.

I pulled out her file. She had borrowed a thousand dollars and would be paying back fifteen dollars a week for a couple of years. I took her money and entered the payment. Returning her passbook, I recognized the scent of *Je me souviens* — my perfume — on her. From better days, I imagined — and wished I'd stop imagining. She looked old enough to be my mother. I'll never forget how she pulled herself up tall before she walked out.

After that I felt I was on the wrong side of the counter. It wasn't long before I gave notice. I thought I'd go to college, possibly for a degree in psychological social work. Frank was making enough money to take care of us both in style. Our investments

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(started on tips from stockbroker reports we got from you-know-where) were doing well too.

One night we were housecleaning, and Frank came back from the incinerator room looking amused. "You know the pile of *Intellectual Digests* I took out there ten minutes ago? They've vanished. You know where to?" He pointed next door.

Frank said he'd heard them sneak out, as if they'd been waiting to go through our garbage. I think that under his flippancy he felt as bad as I did. He stood there on the Yugoslavian carpet, pulling thoughtfully at the point of his beard.

I didn't like to mention it, but I had noticed a steady drop in the quality of their wine until, lately, they'd been putting out beer bottles. One by one their magazine subscriptions had lapsed, and we'd picked up on the ones we missed. No more delivery boxes either. Now and then there would be a folded paper bag from some discount chain, but not even many of them. The opera companies had stopped sending subscription offers. It was too sad. I rushed through my magazines so I could get them out to the incinerator room while they were still current. At Christmas I left one of our gift packages of cheeses, unopened, and didn't open my door again all night.

I'm not sure when they moved out. Their life had become so bare that there was little to move. Their bicycles had long since disappeared. The neighbors themselves must have slipped off one day with all their belongings in one or two elevator loads. It must have been about the time that Frank had started thinking about a bigger place for us.

Well, we had so many friends — Frank's clients, my pals from school, the Caucus, our theater friends, country club friends, vacation friends, a couple of artists we'd met around town. We needed room to entertain, a bigger kitchen. Frank wanted a studio for his painting. Mr. Janus, the superintendent, said we wouldn't have to move because the next apartment was empty. A chill went through me as Mr. J continued. People in our line on another floor had broken down walls and made one mighty nice apartment from the two. He took us next door to show how it could be done. "If you have that kind of money," he said. We had that kind of money, but still, it was depressing to see the place so empty.

An architect, a personal friend, redesigned the space for us. He worked with a marvelous decorator and, between them, it took no time to put things in beautiful shape. We furnished with antiques and original art. Someone from *Beautiful Homes* magazine came to take pictures.

Now with two mailboxes I thought it would be smart to break down the wall between them, too. I went downstairs to look. When you flip the tops

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down, you see the names taped on the inside — so the mailman knows. I flipped down ours and the one next door. Lined up together they read NESSOR ROSSEN. Then I remembered Nedra Rossen, that woman, that day. I couldn't wait for the elevator. I ran up the stairs as if rocketed.

"Calm down!" Frank was shaking me. "It's a typical printer's error," he said. "He made a mistake when he was putting our name in the second box. Can't you see that Rossen is our name spelled backward?" He fixed me a strong drink and watched me drink it. "You're so excitable lately," he was gone too; the new manager, Mr. Joffrey, would be glad to help me. I proceeded directly to his office, and to ask about Nedra Rossen and see if she was really the woman next door. There were no cashiers: everything was computer now, no passbooks, hardly a word exchanged. One woman just stood there monitoring the whole operation. I asked her if I could speak to Mr. Barlow, but he was gone too: the new manager,Mr. Joffrey, would be glad to help me. I proceeded directly to his office, and he greeted me with wide, tiger smile, clearly recognizing me. "Oh. So you've finally come to pay up," he said.

I had a throwback of ingenue nerves. I thought he was going to ask me to make up for all my cash-drawer shortages. I trembled because I knew his collection technique. "Mr. Joffrey!" I said with all the elegance I could muster. "I don't owe anything. I just came to say hello."

He stood up and leaned on the heavy desk with his shoulders looming. "Come off it, babe," he said coldly. "I've seen every dodge in the world. Just as I'm closing in on you, you show up here dressed like the cat's meow. Let me tell you, Nedra Rossen . . ."

I didn't say another word. I knew there was nothing to say.

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Gene O'Neill ("300 S. Montgomery," July 1984) tells us a story in which death is heralded by the vision of an exotic, Costa Rican bird, the white quetzal. He writes, "My wife and I actually spent three days in the Monteverde Cloud Forest .... neither of us saw a white quetzal." Luckily for them ... and for us.

The White Quetzal

BY
GENE O'NEILL

"¡Madre de Dios! He visto El Blanco...."

El Indio, St. Elena,
Costa Rica, July 1970

Simon Judah first saw the white quetzal Wednesday afternoon at his uncle's funeral.

After leaving work early in San Jose, he had driven up the peninsula to Millbrae, arriving ten minutes late for the graveside ceremony. A groundsman directed him to the tiny cluster of people around the white-draped casket, listening to a minister. Self-consciously, Simon joined the group of strangers — the men in dark suits and sunglasses; the women in dark dresses, dark hats, and sunglasses — smoothed the wrinkles from his blue polo shirt, then jammed his hands into his Levi's cords. He took a deep breath and tried to concentrate on the eulogy, but the words blurred into a meaningless drone. Too hot, he thought, wiping his forehead and glancing yearningly at a nearby circle of shade, cast by a magnificent black oak about twenty yards from the group of mourners. His gaze shifted to the coffin, draped with a shawl of white linen and a huge spray of red carnations — Uncle Will had always worn a red carnation in his lapel.

Simon smiled. His uncle had been quite a character, often mentioned in Herb Caen's column in the *Chronicle,* usually in connection with his gallery in San Francisco.... Probably most of these people were from the art crowd, Simon thought, looking around the group. He spotted one familiar face: Mr. Rutherford, Uncle Will's attorney ... and beside the lawyer, a young man with a handkerchief to his face. Al-

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ways a young man around Uncle Will, he thought, even now.

Simon let his gaze wander back to the great oak. Uncle Will had been good to him, supporting him in his senior year of high school, after the death of Simon's mother; then the old man helped him into Stanford ... but Simon had flunked out in the second semester, and they argued violently ... he hadn't heard from his uncle in twelve years. So Simon had been surprised when Mr. Rutherford called to advise that he would be included in his uncle's will.

The minister droned on in the heat, like an old water cooler with loose bearings....

Simon felt sleepy—

Something landed on a branch of the black oak. Simon narrowed his eyes against the reflected glare, realizing it was a bird. A great white bird, dazzling in the sunlight, much larger than a seagull, long tail feathers drooping below the tree branch—He almost choked with the recognition. It was a quetzal, the rare Central American bird. But this one was unusual — the color of clouded ice. Simon clutched himself, shivering and rubbing the goose bumps along his bare arms — the temperature had plunged twenty or thirty degrees. He glanced at the others, but incredibly, no one seemed affected by the temperature drop or the appearance of the strange bird.

The minister closed his book but rattled on....

Simon looked back at the limb, but the bird was gone, and overhead, fleecy clouds screened the sun. But it had been a quetzal, he thought, a remarkable sighting. *Quetzal blanco.* The expression triggered a memory....

As a high school graduation present, Uncle Will had taken Simon on a business trip to Costa Rica. Will's friend, Miguel, only slightly older than Simon, had accompanied them on the trip. They landed in San José, the tiny capital of about three hundred thousand, where Will spent the day with an art broker, securing items for his gallery. Left on their own, Simon and Miguel roamed the narrow streets of the busy city, buying mangoes, unusually sweet bananas, and delicious green oranges from street vendors. In the afternoon they escaped the din and diesel pollution of the city by taking a bus tour of Irazú; but they saw little, the famed 11,260-foot volcano shrouded by an icy curtain of rain. After returning to San José that evening, the boys looked over Will's new acquisitions. The colorful *molas* of imaginary creatures caught Simon's eye — the unique reverse appliqué stitchery was made by the Cuna Indians of San Blas Island off the coast of Costa Rica in the Caribbean. After dinner at the Amstel Hotel, they all fell into bed exhausted.

Early the next day, they traveled five hours by Jeep, northwest of the capital up into the Cordillera de Til-

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eran, to Monteverde, an isolated community settled by Quakers from Alabama in 1951. While Will negotiated with a young woman for watercolors of wildlife, Simon and Miguel hiked the narrow trails of the nearby cloud forest, a jungle without stifling heat. The boys saw numerous rare amphibians, including the poison dart frog and the beautiful golden toad, a local species only recently discovered in 1964; they saw huge beetles with varnished ebony armor, and many, many brightly colored birds, including the famed quetzal — emerald and azure cloak, scarlet chest, long tail feathers elegantly iridescent. At noon they ate lunch at a cleared spot on the continental divide, La Ventana, catching glimpses of the Caribbean Sea to the east between clumps of cloud mist blown in by galelike winds.

Tired but happy, the boys joined Will later that night at a cantina in the nearby village of St. Elena. Over his first legal drink — *guaro,* the local equivalent of rum — Simon described their adventure to his uncle. But their celebration was disturbed by an old man who sat at a corner table, staring up toward the cloud forest, moaning something over and over in Spanish. After consulting with the bartender, Miguel pieced the story together.

The old man, a mestizo called El Indio, had seen a mythical white quetzal in the cloud forest. The Indians, dating back to the Aztecs, believed the quetzal to be sacred and decorated their helmets with quetzal feathers. But the white one was special. It was said to be the personification of death — *El pajaro de la muerte: El Blanco.* So the old man had seen the White One.... That night at their *pensione* in St. Elena, Miguel was scratched by a cat. Twenty-two days later, back home, he died of rabies....

The draped casket had disappeared, lowered into the grave: and the people were all leaving.

Simon took another deep breath, still stunned by the sighting of a mythical creature. Of course he didn't believe in old legends, garbled by drunken Indians ... still, he knew he *had* seen a white quetzal, a unique bird unknown to science. He forced the image to the back of his mind and followed the group to the parked cars. At his Mustang he slipped into the front seat and rubbed both arms vigorously, remembering how suddenly the air had chilled after the appearance of the bird. *El pajaro de la muerte: El Blanco.* He shuddered and flipped on the radio ... "Cast Your Fate to the Wind," by Vince Guaraldi. Starting the car, Simon decided he needed a drink. As he approached 101, he ignored the southbound turn off to Sunnyvale; instead, he turned north, drawn toward the city of Guaraldi's haunting jazz piano.

The TV woke Simon.

He was disoriented, his head was

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home in Sunnyvale. The digital clock on the dresser read: 1:15 P.M. Damn, he thought, rubbing his throbbing head, unable to recall much of the evening after the funeral. He had driven up to San Francisco ... but after that everything was vague; it was like trying to recall a dream. Simon sat up and shivered, remembering the bird at his uncle's funeral—

The TV blared, sending a sliver of pain into a spot behind his eyes. One of those stupid game shows or soaps, he thought, grimacing with pain. He got up and stumbled into the front room. His eleven-year-old daughter was lying on the floor in front of the set. "Jenny, for God's sake," he growled, "turn—"

She shushed him, making the "Be quiet" sign with a forefinger to her lips.

Simon glimpsed the overlay, NEWS UPDATE, before it blinked off the screen— Then a woman's voice: "... found brutally stabbed to death in Golden Gate Park ... sexually mutilated. The young victim has been identificed as Paul Saboda...." A photo of a young man flashed on the screen, stirring a vague recollection in Simon. He rubbed his eyes, trying to massage away the annoying pain. "Saboda was last seen leaving E.T.C., a bar on Castro...."

"What does it mean, Daddy?"

Jenny was asking him something, but her voice sounded strange ... distant. "What—?"

"Sexually mutilated."

Simon shrugged. "I'm not sure." The expression was ominous, raising goose bumps along his arms. He left the room, shuffling into the kitchen. Rummaging through the refrigerator, he found a can of tomato juice, a shriveled lemon, and a tray of ice. He fixed himself a Bloody Mary, minus vodka and spices; then he washed down two aspirin with the drink.

Still he felt peculiar ... his thinking fuzzy.

Betty came in from the backyard, wearing her gardening togs; an old white shirt, Levi's, and a red bandanna over her hair. Simon stared at her, as if looking at a stranger, not his wife of twelve years.

"Morning ... or afternoon," she said coolly, placing several small zucchini in the sink. "You were awfully late last night ... and noisy." Her voice sounded strange, too ... tinny, distant, like an echo.

Simon nodded numbly. Sweat glistened on Betty's upper lip, and the sight repelled him, causing him to look away. "Sorry," he mumbled stiffly, as if he had brushed a stranger's arm. "I went out for a few beers after work."

She continued, but her words were a drone, like the minister's at Uncle Will's funeral.

"... And Nelson called from the plant about seven." She paused a moment, washing her hands. "He was wondering where you were—"

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God, he'd forgotten to go back and finish the report for the Consumer Products Protection Agency.... "Well," he began, clearing his throat, feeling like a small schoolboy trying to explain an unexcused absence. "I had a couple of beers with Mr. Rutherford, Uncle Will's attorney ... one thing led to another, you know."

Betty dried her hands, then wiped her upper lip with the dish towel. She nodded, accepting the explanation. After a moment she frowned, then said slowly, "Simon, we *need* to talk ... about us. You and me ... and Jenny. It's like you've been avoiding us the past two months. Staying away from home until all hours ... I know you're worried about this promotion when Nelson retires, but...."

She droned on.

The lie about Mr. Rutherford reminded Simon of the funeral and the white bird. The quetzal. Something flickered through the fuzziness: Had he seen it a second time, later last night? He thought so ... but he wasn't sure.

Betty touched his arm, her fingers rough as sandpaper. "... We haven't made love in over two months...." Unable to maintain eye contact, he struggled to concentrate on her words. But it was no use. Her tinny voice sent more slivers of pain into his head. Every so often he nodded, but his thoughts drifted to Nelson, the operations manager at the plant. Nelson would be mad as hell about the CPPA flammability report. The government agency had got several noncompliance injunctions against cellulose fiber insulation plants in the East. Jesus, what timing! he thought, ridiculing himself. Nelson retired soon, and he was being considered for the spot—

Betty had stopped.

Simon felt compelled to say something. "I'm sorry, dear," he mumbled lamely, "it's the strain at the plant. The promotion and all."

Betty took off the bandanna and shook out her auburn hair. She flashed Simon an understanding smile. "I know," she said, patting his arm affectionately. Her hand felt hot, abrasive. "When will you know ... if you got it, I mean?" Her voice seemed softer, more normal.

"Soon, I think," he answered, able to look her in the eye. "Nelson leaves at the end of the month. So it'll be soon."

The strain eased from Betty's face. "What do you think about the trip to Mother's?"

Mother's? She had mentioned something about Sonoma—

"It would be good for Jenny and me, if it's O.K with you.... Maybe you could drive up Sunday?"

Simon nodded, feeling a sense of relief. His head had cleared and he felt better. The trip was a good idea. He needed some quiet after work. "Fine...."

Betty opened the freezer and

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smiled. "There're several TV dinners for you."

He smiled back and left the room.

Simon took the Central Expressway south to the industrial park back of the San Jose airport.

He waved at Gavin, the security man, as he drove through the gate at Insul-gard and into his parking stall. For a minute he sat in the Mustang, the prework tension tightening his stomach muscles. The Feds, the state, the local planning commissions, and even utility companies: all interested in cellulose fiber insulation, requiring more testing, more controls, and *more* headaches for Simon. He sighed. Quality control supervisor was definitely the hot seat at Insul-Gard.

Stiffly he climbed out of the Mustang and walked across the parking lot, waving or nodding to a few of the guys on the day shift. He stopped for a moment to talk to Ed Jarecki, his day shift Q.C. tech. "Ed, how's it going today!"

Jarecki frowned, shaking his head. "McHenry's waiting in your office—"

Simon winced as if he had been jabbed in the chest with a sharp object. McHenry was their Underwriters' Laboratories field inspector, a retired army major who enjoyed the surprise monthly inspections, especially writing up variances in production or quality control procedures. Simon groaned, managing a feeble wave as Jarecki left. Dammit, he thought, two hours and who knows how much trouble. But he realized the U.L. label was Insul-Gard's lifeblood. Without it, they couldn't sell one bag of cellulose fiber insulation on the West Coast. Reluctantly, Simon stepped into his office next to the plant lab.

The heavyset, red-faced McHenry rose from a chair, setting down a cup of coffee. He shook Simon's hand as if they were close friends. "Judah, how are you?"

"Good, Mac. Yourself?" Simon answered, able to mask his hostility. He spotted a note propped up on his desk: *See me after U.L. leaves. Nelson.* Jesus, more trouble, Simon thought, remembering he had left Nelson hanging last night with the unfinished CPPA report. He poured himself a cup of coffee. "Well ... records first, Mac?"

McHenry nodded, but raised a pudgy finger. "We'll cut this month's inspection a little short, Judah," he whispered in a conspiratorial tone. "Granddaughter's birthday party tonight. Just skim the records." He opened his blue U.L. binder, paying little attention to the various records, *except* for the number of forty-pound bags Insul-Gard had received from the bag manufacturer since the last U.L. inspection. Insul-Gard paid U.L. for every label that stated U.L. test data. "Ah ... same formula?" McHenry asked, referring to the borates used as fire retardants in the ground newsprint.

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"Yes," Simon answered. They could not change their formula and retain the existing U.L. label without going through a full-scale set of expensive tests at the U.L. lab in Santa Clara.

McHenry skimmed through the other records. "Hmmm ... good." He snapped his binder closed. "O.K., Judah, let's take a look at the line. We can skip the inventory count and broken-bag count ... I'll accept your figures this time."

Inwardly, Simon smiled. Happy birthday, little girl.

Before leaving the office, they put on hard hats, slipped on particle masks, and inserted disposable earplugs. Then they stepped out onto the plant floor and were assailed by the din and dust of production. Simon led McHenry through the maze of pallets of finished product to the equipment line. They followed the production flow: the chemical loading station and chemical grinder, the newsprint preshredder, the two Jacobson hammer mills— Simon stopped and signaled a lineman to cut the chemical feed. After a moment a warning light flashed over the first paper mill, indication that *no* untreated newsprint was being processed. The line started back up, and they moved to the bagging tank with the huge cyclone, which resembled an inverted twenty-five-foot-high ice cream cone — it controlled most of the dust. For a moment they paused, watching the plastic-wrapped forty-pound cubes of insulation coming off the two bagging pistons, every fifth bag manually checked on a digital scale before being stacked on a pallet: 39.8, 39.7, 40.4, 39.9, 40.1. U.L. allowed only a 0.5-pound tolerance to ensure proper chemical-newsprint mix in the final product: a difficult parameter with a low-density material.

Abruptly, McHenry walked away, hollering over the noise: "Looks good, Judah.... Let's see one lab test ... a basket burn."

They walked into the line lab next to Simon's office, shedding their masks, earplugs, and hats. A young man was at the lab bench, doing calculations with a desk calculator.

"Jim, pull a sample for a basket test, please," Simon instructed the tech.

In a few minutes, Jim returned with a large basket of insulation, which looked like the gray stuffing from a soft doll. Simon watched as Jim prepared and executed a burn of the insulation ... 19 percent weight loss, well within the U.L. fire-retardant parameter.

McHenry nodded and scribbled a note in his blue binder. Then he turned the binder around and said, "Sign my inspection sheet, Judah."

Simon signed his name and walked McHenry out to the parking lot. He waved good-bye as the inspector left, then sighed with relief. His back was soaked with sweat, his left eyelid

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twitching out of control. As Simon climbed the stairs to the management offices, he looked at his watch: 5:32. Everyone would be gone by now, except Nelson. The door to the old man's office was open. Nelson looked up from his desk, signaling Simon to come in and sit down.

As Simon settled in his seat, Nelson leaned back in his swivel chair and asked, "How'd it go ... with U.L.?"

Simon grinned. "O.K., no variances this time."

Nelson looked back at his desk, grunting his approval, then he burst out angrily, "Dammit, Simon! That was a fool stunt last night .... not even calling after the funeral." He was staring at Simon, his bushy white eyebrows knotted in an angry, questioning frown.

Simon pressed his eyelid, trying to control the flutter. For a moment the old man's face blurred, as if the room had suddenly filled with fog. Simon blinked, "Yeah, I know, Jack," he said, his voice tight with strain. "I ... ah, met with my uncle's attorney, Mr. Rutherford," he lied lamely. "We had a few beers, one thing leading to another ... and finally, it was too late to call, you know?"

The old man shook his head slowly, the wrinkles in his face etched deeply. "No, Simon, I don't know. You could've called me at home." He picked up a pencil, chewed on the eraser, and stared absently out the window.

Sheepishly, Simon asked about the report.

Nelson shrugged. "*I* finished the report myself. T.J. read it today before sending it to CPPA." He looked back at Simon. "You know it could've killed your chance to sit here" — he tapped the arm of the swivel chair with his pencil — "if T.J. knew *you* hadn't finished that report." The old man glanced at the door, lowering his voice. "You've come a long way, Simon," he said, the anger fading, leaving his voice soft ... tired.

Simon rubbed the fluttering eyelid again, then nodded. "I know ... and thanks, Jack." It was Nelson who had taken him off the line, pushed him through promotions: line foreman, shift supervisor, and Q.C. supervisor; he had encouraged Simon to take business courses at San Jose City College ... and now, covering for him. He owed the old man a lot. "I appreciate—"

"O.K.," Nelson interrupted gruffly. He looked squarely at Simon, the concern obvious in his eyes. "Everything else O.K., son ... I mean at home, the wife and kid?"

"Oh, yeah." Simon nodded. "Everything's fine at home, Jack .. ah, right now Jenny and Betty are up at Sonoma, visiting Betty's mother, but everything's just fine." The damn eyelid continued to twitch.

"Good...." The old man looked self-conscious. "Thought it might be home problems ... guess it's just me."

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He turned back to his desk, rearranging papers, apparently shifting his train of thought. Finally he asked, "What about Jim?" The deep frown had eased from his face. "Doesn't he leave Monday for school?"

Oh, Jesus! Simon swore silently. It had slipped his mind that he needed a new swing shift tech trained by Monday. "Ah...." There was *one* boy on the line ... Manuel Rodriguez. He seemed bright, energetic ... though, for some reason, the other men shunned him. "I've got a man spotted, Jack. Thought I'd talk to him at dinner tonight. Rodriguez. He's living with relatives in San Jose ... studying English at night school. Hardworking, wants to better himself—"

Nelson stood up. "Good ... take care of it." The old man moved slowly toward the door. He stopped before leaving. "Simon—?"

Simon stood up. "Yes, Jack."

"See a doc about that eye," the old man said slowly. "Might be a vitamin deficiency or ...." His voice trailed off and he left the office before Simon could answer.

After dinner at eight, Simon met with the shift supervisor, making arrangements to relieve Manuel on the line. He took the young man into the lab and introduced him to Jim, instructing the tech to familiarize the new man with the various test procedures and preliminary reports. Then Simon went into his office to do paper work.

• • •

Later, after work, as Simon opened his Mustang door to leave the plant, Manuel appeared.

"Thank you very much, señor," the boy said in careful English, looking down at his feet.

Simon understood. It was more than the dollar or so an hour difference in pay. He recalled his own feelings after getting off the line: *respite* — relief from the dust; the rattling of the equipment; the never-ending stream of bags; and the other men, often rough, sweaty, crude....

Manuel looked up at Simon. In the light cast by the nearby mercury-vapor standard, the boy's face seemed different ... smooth, his high cheeks pink as if rouged, his eyelashes long, black, delicate—

A car eased by them, an old Merc slung back, low-rider fashion, just out of the umbrella of light. From the dark interior, Simon heard a low mix of English and Spanish, nothing clear except one word: *puto*. He stepped nearer to see inside but the driver suddenly gunned the car, and it jumped away, headed for the parking lot gate. Simon shrugged. Someone jealous about the promotion. He looked back at Manuel—

Simon gasped.

The white quetzal was sitting on the fence near the stall sign: *Mr. Judah*. So close. The bird stared back at Simon, its snowy feathers glistening

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in the eerie light. So beautiful. Almost translucent ... just a hint of blue, like an ice sculpture. Magnificent—

He breathed twin plumes of steam into the night air, realizing it was freezing. Simon wrapped his arms around his body, trying to ease the chill.

"Señor? Señor Judah?" The boy was grasping Simon's shoulder, shaking him gently. "What is it, señor?"

Simon's left eyelid twitched out of control. Unable to answer, he gestured behind Manuel toward the fence; but the white quetzal was gone....

Brrring.

Sluggishly, Simon struggled into consciousness.

Brrring. His mouth tasted metallic. He took a deep breath, letting the air trickle across his cracked lips. The clock read: 8:30 A.M. It was early Friday morning .. he was home in Sunnyvale.

Brrring. The phone, it was the damn phone. "Hello," Simon whispered dryly.

"Simon, is that you?" The voice was distant ... unreal, like a computer recording— "Simon?"

"Yes, it's me," he answered, closing his eyes.

"Simon, some son of a bitch stuffed your new tech into the dumpster behind the plant.... Cut his balls off!"

"Jack—?" Simon was still fuzzy, but he knew the voice belonged to Jack Nelson.

"Yeah, garbage men found him at six this morning—"

New tech? Manuel Rodriguez! Finally Simon was making sense of Nelson's ranting. "They found Manuel?"

"That's what I'm telling you. *Murdered.* Cops are here now. Whoever nailed him is one crazy bastard."

Simon felt nauseated.... Then he remembered meeting the boy in the parking lot after work... And the lowrider Merc. Jesus! The bird, too.

"They'll probably want to talk to you when you come in—"

"Jack," Simon mumbled hoarsely, "I'm not coming in today. Sick." His eyelid fluttered.

After a pause: "O.K. ... but Simon, there's something else. T.J. made his decision ... he's promoting Raymond when I go." The voice sounded more distant. "T.J. can talk to you when you come in.... You know I'm sorry, Simon ... I guess T.J. feels Raymond has a more rounded background. Line, sales, sales manager ... he finished college—"

The phone slid from Simon's hand, dropping to the bed. It didn't make any difference, he thought, but the boy—

"Simon ... Simon?" Far away a voice squeaked.

Absently, Simon picked up the phone and gently dropped it into the cradle.

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Late Saturday morning, Simon again awakened slowly, struggling up out of the familiar fog, his memory of the previous night a blank. He dressed and drove over to the Copper Kettle for breakfast. Brooding over coffee, he glanced at the front page of the *Chronicle*. A photograph of a young man raised the hair on the back of Simon's neck. He skimmed the article: ... ***slashed to death*** ... ***mutilated*** ... ***linked to at least two other murders in the Bay Area***.... Heart beating rapidly, Simon stared at the photograph, and he recalled fragments....

He had driven to San Francisco ... then drifted aimlessly from bar to bar, a vague blur of places and faces.... Then he was on a stool, where everything seemed right ... the light, dim and silvery.... He ordered a stinand sipped the drink slowly, watching couples dancing in the mirror.... Suddenly it dawned on him: the dancers were *all* men. He drained his drink, his gaze drawn to the golden letters over the mirror: E.T.C. He sat in place, trying to remember another time.... Finally he gave up and ordered another drink—

Someone slid onto the stool next to Simon ... a young man: white even teeth, fine features, short blonde hair, eyes a washed blue, a tiny gold post in his left earlobe.... The young man looked at Simon and smiled. Simon shifted his gaze to his drink, stirring it with his finger, a strange sensation tingling in his chest.

"Hello," the young man said, lightly touching Simon's arm. "I'm Donel...."

Simon looked down at the hand on his arm: long fingers, nails manicured, a gold ring engraved with a gothic *D*.... The fingers moved gracefully, the touch was delicate. Simon swallowed hard, trying to work up moisture in his dry mouth. He nodded. "M-m-my name's," he stammered "Judah ... Simon Judah."

The young man removed his hand, making a gesture to the bartender. "Jeff, give Simon another ... stinger. I'll have one too, please."

Things slowed down, the memory dimmer.... They danced, Simon awkward, clumsy.... Eventually they left E.T.C. together, Donel's hand gripping Simon's elbow, guiding him to a nearby flat. Simon stumbled on the porch steps; he knew he was drunk. At the door, Donel paused, then leaned close to Simon, his warm moist lips brushing Simon's cheek. In the dim light, the boy's face made the breath catch in Simon's throat. So ... beautiful! He closed his eyes as Donel unlocked the door and led him inside. He opened his eyes and groaned—

Simon thought it was a painting over the table; but the chill struck him like a blow, and he ***knew***. The white quetzal sat on the table, staring at them, its eyes glittering like two blue-white stars in a wintry sky.

"Oh, n-n-no," Simon stuttered, his teeth chattering in the freezing flat ...

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slower ... dimmer ... confused—

A scream, but the sound distant, like an echo from the far end of the tunnel.... Donel on his knees reaching out to Simon, his hand wet and sticky.... And the others — Manuel and Paul — had reached out, too, terror on their faces—

Simon blinked and stared at the paper. He rose slowly and threw a few bills on the counter, feeling numb — his mind frozen. He needed air. He staggered out of the restaurant, looking about frantically until he spotted the familiar Mustang. Ride, he thought simply, ride.

A high-pitched wail penetrated Simon's confused state.

In the rearview mirror, he saw the black-and-white highway patrol car closing in on him, its turret flashing red in the darkness. It was night! Panic seized him. He jammed down the accelerator; but, amazingly, the patrol car swung out and zoomed by, as if the Mustang were crawling along. Simon stared wide-eyed until the red taillights disappeared. Then it dawned: they were *not* chasing him. He eased up on the aecelerator, a squeak of relief catching in his throat— Somewhere someone was looking for him. He had been bad ... he had to find someplace safe. He glanced out the side windows: colored lights dancing like a neon kaleidoscope.... Tears blurred his vision. Where was he—? A sign; he recognized that street sign. Geary Street, 101 winding through

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the city. He cried out with joy! Betty's mother's.... They'd come this way many times—Betty's face flashed into his mind, and he mentally clung to his wife's image. Betty, Betty, Betty.

Ahead the Golden Gate Bridge loomed, its burnt orange color obscured by fog. He passed through the free side of the toll booths, looking ahead for the first tower; but it was gone, swallowed up in the dense mist. Slowly he edged the Mustang up the grade of the bridge.... He was overwhelmed by a feeling of aloneness. The thick fog had sealed him off from the world: no lights, no cars, no joggers, no cyclists. He was alone, following the cone of yellow light from his headlights. Suddenly they blinked out. He pulled the Mustang over, feeling panic. He had to get across the bridge, drive to Sonoma, and find ... find — He couldn't remember the name. He got out of the car, trying to recall, but his thoughts were a confusing blur. Then he glimpsed something in the mist and heard ... wingbeats? He cocked his head expectantly. Nothing. Absolute quiet. *No.* The mist blew against his face, washing his mind clear. He understood; he knew *who* he was, and he recognized this place. La Ventana. He was home. Quickly he stripped away his clothes. Then he hopped up and perched on the limb of the strangler fig.... After a moment he spread his wings and soared out into the cloud forest.

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POISON IN THE NEGATIVE

Yesterday I sat down to write my 321st essay for *Fantasy and Science Fiction*. I called it "How High in the Sky" and it went swimmingly. I was pleased at the ease with which I worked out its construction. It practically wrote itself, and I scarcely had to look anything up. I whistled while I worked.

And then, when I reached the last page and launched into my climactic paragraphs, I thought to myself: Why does this suddenly sound familiar to me? Have I ever written an essay like this before?

As it happens, I am widely noted as a shy and reserved person of extraordinary modesty, but if there is one thing about myself of which I'm just a weentsy bit proud, it is my phenomenal memory. So I punched my recall button and up on my internal display screen came an essay called "The Figure of the Farthest." Hoping earnestly that my memory had missed fire, I looked it up. It turned out to be essay #182, published in the December 1973 issue, about 11½ years ago. There it was. That earlier essay was essentially what I had just written.

I promptly tore up what I had spent most of the day writing and fell into disgruntled thought. What else would I write?

For a while, I could think of nothing but subjects I had already dealt

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with. In fact, I was just coming to the horrifying conclusion that I had finally written everything there was to write, when my dear wife, Janet, entered my office with a concerned look on her face.

Goodness, I thought to myself, the sweet woman is so attuned to my moods that she could feel my misery, telepathically, from the other end of the apartment.

"What do you want?" I growled, lovingly.

She held out her hand. "You forgot to take your vitamins today." she said.

Ordinarily I greet a sentiment like that with an amiable snarl and a few affectionate cursory remarks. This time, however, I beamed and said, "Thank you so much, darling," and swallowed the stupid pills with a big grin.

You see, it occurred to me that I had never written an essay on vitamins.

I presume that human beings have always suffered from vitamin deficiencies, but this usually happened when they were undernourished or confined to a montonous diet (or both) — as, for instance, if they were in prison, or in besieged cities, or were totally impoverished.

In general, they were then considered to have died of hunger or of one of the many diseases with which human beings were afflicted. Such deaths were endured stoically in the good old days, especially if the dead and dying were varlets, knaves, churls and other members of the lower classes.

But then a brand-new peril began to strike sea-voyagers —

The diet on shipboard was generally monotonous and bad. There was no refrigeration in the good old days, and so there was no use storing anything on shipboard that spoiled or went moldy too easily. Consequently, the standard foods for sailors at sea were items such as hard tack and salt pork, which lasted practically forever, even at room temperature, for the good and sufficient reason that no self-respecting bacterium would touch the stuff.

Such items supplied the sailors with calories and very little else, but sea-voyaging in ancient and medieval times consisted largely of hugging the coast and making frequent stops during which sailors could get real food, so there was no problem.

But then, in the 15th Century, came the Age of Exploration, and ships began making longer voyages during which they remained at sea

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for longer intervals. In 1497, the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama (1460-1524) circled Africa and completed the first successful voyage by sea from Portugal to India. The voyage took eleven months and, by the time India was reached, many of the crew were suffering from scurvy, a disease characterized by bleeding gums, loosened teeth, aching joints, weakness and a tendency to bruise.

It was not an unknown disease, for it was also suffered by those who were under long siege during wartime, and had been specifically remarked and commented upon since the time of the Crusades at least. This was the first occasion, however, in which the disease had appeared on shipboard.

Naturally, no one knew the cause of scurvy, anymore than anyone at the time knew the cause of any disease. Nor did anyone suspect that the trouble might be dietary, since the natural belief was that food was food, and if it stopped the hunger pains, that was it.

Scurvy continued to plague sea-voyagers for two centuries after da Gama, and it was a serious matter. Sailors who were down with scurvy could not do their work, and the ships of early modern times were all too prone to sink in a storm even when the entire crew was able-bodied and hardworking.

And yet there were hints that scurvy could be handled.

The French explorer Jacques Cartier (1491-1557) sailed three times to North America between 1531 and 1542, exploring the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the St. Lawrence River, and laying the foundations for French dominion in what is now the Province of Quebec. On his second voyage, he wintered in Canada in 1535-36. Adding to the poor food on shipboard was the continued lack of anything else during the winter, so that twenty-five of Cartier's men died of scurvy, and nearly a hundred others were disabled to one degree or another.

According to the story, the Indians had the sufferers drink water in which pine-needles had been soaked, and there was a marked improvement as a result.

Then, in 1734, an Austrian botanist, J. G. H. Kramer, was with the Austrian army during the War of the Polish Succession. He noticed that when scurvy appeared it was almost always among the rank and file of the soldiers, while the officers generally seemed to be immune. He noticed that the common soldiers lived monotonously on bread and beans, while the officers frequently had green vegetables to eat. When an officer didn't eat his green vegetables, he was liable to get scurvy just

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as though he were a private. Kramer recommended that fruit and vegetables be included in the diet to prevent scurvy. No one paid attention. Food was food.

Scurvy was a particular problem for Great Britain, which depended on its navy to defend its shores and protect its commerce. Clearly, if its sailors tended to be disabled by scurvy, it was quite possible that the navy might, at some crucial moment, be unable to perform.

A Scottish physician, James Lind (1716-1794), had served in the British navy, first as a surgeon's mate and then as a surgeon, between 1739 and 1748. That gave him an excellent opportunity to observe the absolutely harrowing conditions on board ships.

(Samuel Johnson, in those days, said that no one would serve on board ship who had the wit to get into jail. He said that ships, as compared to jails, had less room, worse food, worse company, and offered the chance of drowning. During wartime in the eighteenth century, the British lost about 88 men to disease and desertion, for every one killed in action.)

In 1747, Lind chose twelve men who were disabled with scurvy (there were, of course, plenty to choose from), divided them into groups of two and gave each pair a different dietary supplement. One pair had two oranges and a lemon each day for the six days the supplies held out, and *this* pair recovered from their illness with astonishing quickness.

Next came the task of convincing the British navy to feed the sailors citrus fruits regularly. This was almost impossible to do because, as we all know, military men have a rigid quota of one new idea per lifetime, and the British admirals had apparently all had theirs already, at the age of five or thereabouts.

Then, too, Captain Cook (1728-1779), during his voyages of exploration had lost only one man to scurvy. He obtained fresh vegetables at every opportunity, and he also added sauerkraut and malt to the rations. Somehow it was the sauerkraut and malt that got the credit, though they were not particularly effective, and that confused the issue.

Then the American Revolution came along, followed by the French Revolution, and the sense of crisis grew. In 1780 (the year before the climactic battle of Yorktown, when France, for one crucial moment, seized control of the western Atlantic) 2,400 British sailors, one-seventh of the total, were down with scurvy.

In 1794, the British navy was put almost entirely out of action when

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the sailors, driven to despair by their inhuman treatment, rose in a massive mutiny. One of the demands of the mutineers was that they be given a ration of lemon juice. Apparently, the common sailors, not surprisingly, didn't really enjoy scurvy and, even less surprisingly, had more brains than the admirals did.

The mutiny was put down by a judicious mixture of barbaric punishment and reluctant giving in. Since lemons from the Mediterranean were expensive, the British Admiralty settled on limes from the West Indies, which were not quite as effective, but were cheaper. British sailors have been called "limeys" ever since.

In this way, scurvy disappeared as a major threat on British vessels, but Lind was dead by then and could not savor the victory.

And it was a purely local victory. The use of citrus fruits did not spread, and all through the nineteenth century scurvy flourished on land, especially among children who were no longer breast-fed. Though enormous advances were made in medicine during that century, that actually worked *against* the proper treatment of scurvy.

As biochemical knowledge grew, for instance, it became plain that there were three chief classes of organic foodstuffs: carbohydrates, fats and proteins. It was recognized, at last, that food was not necessarily food, but that foods differed in nutritional quality. However, the difference seemed to rest entirely in the amount and type of protein that was present, and scientists tended to look no futher.

In addition, the century saw the great discovery of the influence of microorganisms on disease. So important was this "germ theory" and so effectively did it lead to the control of various infectious diseases, that physicians began to think of *all* disease in terms of germs, and the possibility that diet had something to do with some diseases tended to be brushed aside.

Scurvy wasn't the only disease that afflicted sailors and that could be countered by diet. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Japan was westernizing itself and was rising to the status of a great power. To that end, she worked busily to build a modern navy.

The Japanese sailors ate white rice, fish, and vegetables and were not troubled by scurvy. However, they fell prey to a disease called "beriberi." This is from a Sri Lankese word meaning "very weak." The disease produced damage to the nerves, with the result that a person with beriberi felt weakness in his limbs and great lassitude. In the extreme, the sufferer died.

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The Director-General of the Japanese navy was Kanehiro Takaki, and, in the 1880's, he was greatly concerned over this matter. One-third of all the Japanese sailors were down with beriberi at any one time, but Takaki noted that the officers on board ship generally did *not* get beriberi, and that they had a less monotonous diet than the ordinary sailors did. Takaki also noted that British sailors did not suffer from the disease, and there, too, the diet was different.

In 1884, Takaki decided to produce greater variety in the diet and to add some British items to it. He replaced part of the polished rice with barley, and added meat and evaporated milk to the rations. Behold, beriberi disappeared in the Japanese navy. Takaki assumed that this was so because he had added more protein to the diet.

Again, as in the case of Lind's treatment a century before, nothing further happened. Beriberi, like scurvy, was stopped on shipboard, but, again like scurvy, beriberi continued to flourish on land. To be sure, it is comparatively easy to alter the diet of a few sailors, who can be disciplined harshly for disobedience, while it is considerably more difficult to change the diet of millions of people, especially to a more expensive one, when they can barely manage to find enough of anything at all to eat. (Even today, when the cause and cure of beriberi is precisely known, it kills 100,000 each year.)

Beriberi was endemic in the Dutch East Indies (now called Indonesia) in the nineteenth century, and the Dutch were naturally concerned over the matter.

A certain Dutch physician, Christiaan Eijkman (1858-1930), had served in Indonesia and was invalided home with malaria. He had finally recovered and, in 1884, he agreed to return to Indonesia at the head of a team of physicians in order to study beriberi and to determine how best to deal with it.

Eijkman was convinced that beriberi was a germ disease, and so he took with him some chickens. He hoped to breed chickens in numbers and use them as experimental animals. He would infect them with the disease, isolate the germ, form an antitoxin perhaps, and work out an appropriate treatment to try on human patients.

It didn't work. He could not infect the chickens, and, eventually, the bulk of the medical team returned to the Netherlands. Eijkman stayed on, however, to serve as the head of a bacteriological laboratory, and continued to work on beriberi.

Then, in 1896, quite suddenly, the chickens came down with a par-

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alytic disease. The disease clearly affected the nerves (it was called "fowl polyneuritis" for that reason), and it seemed to the suddenly excited Eijkman that it was quite analogous to the human disease of beriberi, which was also, after all, a polyneuritis.

The chickens, Eijkman felt, had finally caught the disease. Now what he had to do was to locate the polyneuritis germ in the sick chickens, and prove it was infectious by transferring it to those that were yet well, then work out an antitoxin, and so on.

Again, nothing worked, He could not locate a germ, he could not transfer the disease, and worst of all the chickens got well.

The very puzzled and disappointed Eijkman set about finding what had happened and he discovered that just before the chickens had recovered, the hospital had received a new cook.

The previous cook had at some point taken to feeding the chickens with leavings from the diet fed the patients at the hospital, a diet that was heavy on polished white rice — that is, rice with the outer brownish hulls scraped off. (The reason for the polishing is that the hulls contain oils that can grow rancid on standing. The polished rice, oil-free, remains edible for long periods of time.) It was while they were being fed on these scraps that the chickens grew ill.

Then the new cook arrived and was horrified at the thought of feeding food fit for people to mere chickens. He took to feeding them on unpolished rice, complete with hulls. That's when they got better.

Eijkman realized, then, that beriberi was caused and cured by diet and was *not* a germ disease. There had to be something in the rice that caused the disease, and something in the hulls that cured it. It wasn't anything that occurred in substantial quantities since the carbohydrate, fat and protein of rice were in themselves harmless. It had to be some very minute "trace" constituent.

Trace constituents capable of sickening and even killing people were, of course, known. They were called poisons, and Eijkman decided that there was a poison of some sort in the white rice. In the rice hulls, he thought, there was something that neutralized the poison.

This was rather the reverse to the truth, but the notion of trace substances in food that produced or cured sickness proved uncommonly fruitful. Whereas Lind's and Takaki's work was important, but produced no further consequences, Eijkman's work produced a blizzard of subsequent experimentation and brought about an enormous revolution in the science of nutrition.

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It was for this reason that Eijkman was awarded a share in the 1929 Nobel Prize in physiology and medicine, for by that time the seminal nature of his work was abundantly recognized. Unfortunately, he was too ill by that time to go to Stockholm to collect the award in person, and the next year he died; but, unlike Lind, he had lived long enough to witness his own victory.

Eijkman returned to the Netherlands soon after he had made his great discovery, but a co-worker, Gerrit Grijns (1865-1944) remained in Indonesia. It was he who first announced the correct interpretation. In 1901 (the first year of the twentieth century) he presented arguments for believing that something in the rice hulls did not serve to neutralize a toxin, ***but was itself essential to human life.***

White rice resulted in disease, in other words, not because it possessed a small quantity of a poison, but because it ***lacked*** a small quantity of something vital. Beriberi was not merely a dietary disease; it was a dietary deficiency disease.

This was a revolutionary thought! For thousands of years, people had been well aware that one could die through the presence of a bit of poison. Now, for the first time, they had to get used to the thought that death could result from the ***absence*** of a bit of something. That "something" was the opposite of a poison, and since its absence meant death, it was a poison in the negative, so to speak.

Once this fact was absorbed, it seemed likely that beriberi wasn't the only dietary deficiency disease. Scurvy was an obvious example of another. In 1906, the English biochemist Frederick Gowland Hopkins (1861-1947) suggested that rickets, too, was a dietary deficiency disease. He was particularly successful in publicizing the concept and persuading the medical profession to accept it, so he shared the 1929 Nobel Prize with Eijkman.

In 1912, the Polish biochemist, Casimir Funk (1884-1967), suggested pellagra as a fourth dietary deficiency disease.

Nutritionists naturally grew nervous over the business of some trace substances in food that represented life or death to an organism, including the human being. That was made to order for mysticism. What had to be done was to isolate the materials, determine exactly what they were, and find out how they worked. That would reduce matters to ordinary, prosaic biochemistry.

It was not enough, in other words, to work with food and to say,

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"Lemon juice prevents scurvy and brown rice prevents beribri." That might be enough for people who would otherwise get those diseases, but it would not be enough for scientists.

The person who took the first step toward moving beyond the foods themselves was the American biochemist Elmer Verner McCollum (1879-1967). In 1907, he was working on the nutrition of cattle, varying the nature of the diets and analyzing the excreta. There was, however, so much food and excreta involved, and everything was so slow that McCollum grew frustrated and weary. He decided that one had to work with smaller animals and more of them, so that studies could be made more quickly. The knowledge thus gained could be applied to larger animals — as Eijkman had done with his chickens.

McCollum moved beyond chickens. He established the first colony of white rats intended for nutritional studies, a device the rest of the field was quick to follow.

McCollum, futhermore, tried to break down foods into various components — sugar, starch, fat, protein — and feed these, separately and in combination, to the white rats, observing when their growth proceeded normally and when it slowed, or when abnormal symptoms of any sort appeared.

In 1913, for instance, he showed that when he used certain purified diets, on which rats did not grow normally, normal growth could be resumed if a little butterfat or egg-yolk fat were added. Nor was it the fat alone that did the trick, for when lard or olive oil was added to the diet, growth was *not* resumed.

It had to be some trace substance present in some fats in small quantities but not in others. The next year, McCollum reported that he could extract the trace substance from butter, by using various chemical procedures, and add it to olive oil. Thereafter, that olive oil could support growth if it were added to the rats' diet.

This offered strong support to the notion of trace substances necessary to life, and deprived it of any mystical aura. Whatever the trace was, it had to be a chemical substance, and one that could be dealt with by chemical methods.

It happens that living tissue is mostly water. In this watery medium, there are solid structures made up of inorganic material (bones, for instance), or large insoluble molecules (cartilage, for instance). In addition, there are small organic molecules, many of which are soluble in water and exist in solution, in consequence.

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Some tissue molecules, however, are *not* soluble in water. The chief of these are the various fats and oils, which clump together separately from the water. Certain other molecules which are not soluble in water dissolve in the fat instead.

Thus, we can group the small molecules in living tissue as either "water-soluble" or "fat-soluble. Water-soluble substances in tissue can be soaked out in more water. Fat-soluble substances in tissue can be soaked out by making use of solvents such as ether or chloroform.

The trace substance essential to growth that was present in some fats and not others is clearly fat-soluble. McCollum could show, on the other hand, that whatever it was in rice hulls that prevented beriberi could be extracted with water and was therefore water-soluble. That was, in itself, conclusive proof that there was not one overall trace substance that permitted normal growth and prevented disease, but that there were at least two.

In the absence of any knowledge of the structure of these substances, McCollum had to use a simple code to distinguish them. By 1915, he was speaking of them as "fat-soluble A" and "water-soluble B" (giving his own discovery priority out of natural egocentrism). That started the fashion of using letters of the alphabet to identify these trace substances, a habit that continued for a quarter of a century until their chemical structure was known well enough for them to receive other names. Even now, however, the letter designations are frequently used not only by the lay public, but even by biochemists and nutritionists.

Meanwhile, though, another attempt at naming had been made. Funk, whom I mentioned earlier, was working in London on these trace substances. His chemical analyses had convinced him, in 1912, that whatever the trace substance was that prevented beriberi, it contained as part of its chemical structure an atom grouping consisting of a nitrogen atom and two hydrogen atoms (NH_2). This grouping is chemically related to ammonia (NH_3) and is therefore called an "amine" by chemists. Funk turned out to right in this conclusion.

Funk then went on to speculate that if there were more than one of these trace substances, then all were probably one kind of amine or another. (He was wrong in this.) For that reason he called the trace substances, as a group, "vitamines"; that is (from the Latin) "life amines."

It didn't take many years for evidence to accumulate that some trace-substances necessary to life did not have an amine group as part of their

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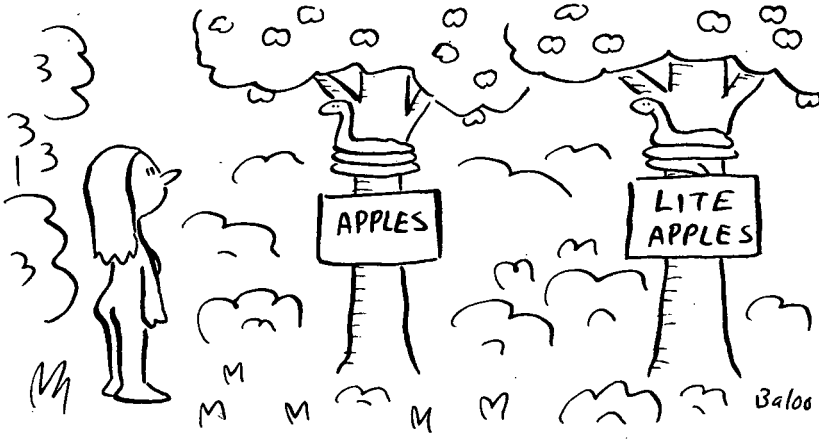
chemical structure and that "vitamine" was consequently a misnomer. There are many cases of this sort in science, and often the misnomer must remain if it has become too embedded in scientific writing and too ground into customary use to be given up. ("Oxygen" is a misnomer, for instance, and has been known to be such for nearly two centuries, but what can we do?)

In 1920, however, the English biochemist Jack Cecil Drummond (1891-1952) suggested that the final "e" of the word might at least be dropped, so that the "amine" reference need not be so overwhelmingly prominent. The suggestion was quickly adopted, and the trace substances have been known as "vitamins" ever since.

For that reason, "fat-soluble A" and "water-soluble B" came to be known as "vitamin A" and "vitamin B" — and I will carry on the story of what we can now call vitamins next month.



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Michael Kube-McDowell was raised in New Jersey, attended Michigan State University and holds a master's degree in science education. His stories have appeared in most of the SF magazines and in various anthologies, and his first novel, EMPRISE, was recently published by Ace. His first F&SF story is a compelling novella about the beginnings of a nuclear winter — and its end...

When Winter Ends

BY
MICHAEL P. KUBE-MCDOWELL

I

It was just 10 A.M. when Daniel Yates drove his four-year-old Honda into the Larchmont Executive Pavilion's parking lot, but he was already tired.

Yates's day had begun five hours earlier, with a "from our affiliate in Baltimore" appearance on the "Today" show to debate a utility spokesman on the question of the restart of Three Mile Island Unit 2. When that three-minute free-for-all was over, he drove seventy miles to the Choptank River under a sky that was dawning gray and gloomy. There he climbed into a Boston Whaler to inspect the heavy-metal sampling buoys in the channel downstream from the new Noble Electroplating plant at Cambridge.

By the time he returned to the office plaza in Glen Burnie, the dark sheet of clouds had begun to deliver on their threat, and the only open parking spaces were at the farthest corner from the six-story structure's entrance. As he dashed across the lot through the drizzle, dodging between cars and dancing around puddles, Yates wondered why he had rejected the perquisite of a reserved space for the director.

I could have parked there, he thought as he left the blacktop for the sidewalk.

There was occupied at the moment by a blue sedan with U.S. Government plates and "Department of the Air Force" stenciled on the driver's door. The sight of the air force car brought a reflexive scowl to Yates's face. But since three other organizations shared the building with

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Yates's Life Studies Foundation, he expended no energy wondering why the sedan was there.

Then he entered the LSF suite and saw a uniformed man standing in the waiting area, and the presence of the car in what was always the first spot to be filled each morning set warning bells ringing. Yates was no student of military insignia, but he knew at a glance that the visitor was high-ranking.

Jeanne, the LSF receptionist, waved Yates toward her desk.

"Who the hell is that?"

"Major General Rutledge. He's been here since eight, waiting to see you and Bernadette."

"What does an air force general want here?"

"He hasn't said."

"Bernie's not here?"

"She's waiting in your office. The general refused to talk to her without you there," Jeanne explained.

"I'll bet that sat well with her."

"She asked to see you for a minute before I show General Rutledge in."

"Give us five."

"You picked a great day to waltz in late," Bernadette Stowe complained, coming to her feet as Yates entered the office.

"I went out to Choptank to check on the water monitors. One of them went off-line during the night, and I wanted to check for tampering," Yates said defensively, dropping his six-foot frame into a chair.

Stowe swept her flowing black hair back off her shoulders with a flick of her hands, an idiosyncratic gesture that told Yates of her anxiety. "I know, I know. I just don't like keeping generals cooling their heels."

"He can stay out there a week as far as I'm concerned. What's this about? Did we tread on any hobnailed feet? Who is he?"

Stowe clucked. "Didn't Jeanne tell you? That's Jack Rutledge — Maj. Gen. Jacob Rutledge, number one in the air force's Logistics Command."

Yates lifted his hands. "Means nothing to me. Know anything else about him?"

"As it happens, I had some time to dig a little. Graduated the academy in '67 and served two years with a C-130 wing in 'Nam. Came back and taught at Sheppard AFB in Wichita Falls for six years. He applied to NASA as a shuttle pilot candidate in '78 but was turned down — not enough hours in high-performance jets. Wing commander in the Central American campaign."

A cold look passed over Yates's face. "That's enough for me."

"He's been at Logistics five years next month. Rep is that he's smart and tough, not flashy, not overly ambitious, a good administrator."

"I didn't hear anything in that that would bring him to our doorstep."

Stowe shook her head. "Me either. But I bet he'll tell us if we give him the chance."

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• • •

Maj. Gen. Jacob ("Jack") Rutledge walked into the conference room with the feline grace and carefully measured movements Yates associated with military automatons. There was no wasted motion, no nuance that spelled personality. *Here's your dehuman syndrome, Montague — the military bureaucrat, the ultimate example.*

"I must apologize again for the delay, General," Stowe said when all were seated.

You don't have to do any such damn thing, Yates thought. *Not to him.*

"Your office gave us no notice you were coming, and it's not uncommon for one or both of us to be out at a field site," she went on.

Rutledge acknowledged and dismissed the apology with a bare nod. "I have a project for you," he said.

Yates whipped forward in his seat and rested his folded hands on the table. "Not interested."

Stowe placed a restraining hand on Yates's arm and dug her fingernails in for emphasis. "What Dr. Yates means is that in the past, we've found that the military's needs and our expertise had a very low correlation. We'll be happy to hear you out."

You'll be happy — not me. What the hell are you thinking? Yates demanded with a sideways glance. When Stowe ignored him, he shook his arm free but said nothing.

"The project is very simple to define but may be rather complex to execute," Rutledge said. "I want you to devise a way to assist the survivors of a nuclear war. I'll provide you with the attack model — how many weapons, what yields, what targets, what coefficient of success. You figure out what conditions the survivors will be living under. You figure out what they'll need most to guarantee their survival and how to get it to them."

Yates twisted in his chair and dug in his pocket. "If you want to do something to guarantee survival, try this," he said in a hard-edged voice, and slid a green plastic card across the table.

Politely Rutledge picked up the card and glanced at it. Yates followed his eyes as he read:

Daniel R. Yates, Ph.D.
Atlantic States District Supervisor
People's Disarmanent Alliance

Rutledge slid the card back. "I'm aware of your leanings. I trust you are realist enough to treat seriously the possibility that disarmament will never take place."

"And that nuclear war will?" Yates said challengingly.

"Yes," Rutledge said quietly, meeting Yates's eyes. "That's what this project is about."

"What do you mean, you know my leanings?"

"Just that. I wouldn't have told

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you even as much as I have already without knowing a great deal about both of you, both the important and the insignificant." A hint of what might have been amusement played briefly on Rutledge's lips. "For instance, though I have never been in either of your offices, I can tell you that Dr. Stowe has all four of her diplomas and most of her awards displayed on the walls, while Dr. Yates's equally impressive credentials are packed away somewhere — I wouldn't be surprised if even he didn't know where they were."

"Is that sort of trivia supposed to impress us?" Yates asked.

"It's not trivia," Rutledge corrected. "As for impressing you, I don't care what you think of me. In point of fact, I have a fair idea of what Dr. Yates thinks of me. When I said I knew his leanings, I meant all of them."

Yates scowled.

"That doesn't matter," Rutledge continued. "What matters is that you're one of the very few organizations capable of pulling off this project under its very tight time constraints."

"These survivors—" Stowe interjected. "We'll have to know where they'll be at the time of attack."

Rutledge's gaze flicked from Yates's unfriendly face to Stowe's hopeful one. "You misunderstand me, Dr. Stowe. I'm not trying to assure that any particular person or group of people survives."

"Not even your own family?" Yates asked cuttingly.

Again Rutledge answered without emotion. "Since we live midway between Bolling and Andrews, it's unlikely my wife and I would survive a general nuclear war."

"Then you're talking about assisting the random survivors?" Stowe asked.

"Yes."

"That is a more interesting challenge."

"Dammit, Bernie, don't encourage him." Yates turned to Rutledge. "General, let me put this to you in words of one syllable. If you're serious about this, then I don't want to help you. If you're not, then I don't want to waste my time."

Rutledge raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"Let's say you are serious," Yates went on, "that for some unnatural reason, you're really concerned about the fact that this nuclear war you've been building for and planning for thirty years would fry and poison a billion or so people and leave any survivors wishing they weren't. Let's say we're unspeakably clever and devise some way to do what you describe. I figure all we've done is make your kind a little more confident that nuclear war would be winnable, and a little more willing to choose that option."

He leaned forward in his chair and slapped the table for emphasis.

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"On the other hand, if you're not serious, then all we're doing is wasting tax money and fattening a file somewhere in the Pentagon when we could be working on something that matters."

"I see," Rutledge said, and began to rise.

Stowe stood up abruptly. "General, you've heard Dr. Yates's opinion, but you haven't heard the firm's decision. If you could excuse us for a few minutes—"

"Done. But I need your answer today. This whole project has to be finished within six months." He glanced from Stowe to Yates and back again. "If you can pull it off on time, we won't have any problems between us in any other area."

Stowe sat on the edge of Yates's desk and gestured at the bare wall. "So — do you know where your diplomas are?"

"No," Yates said gruffly.

"Think it means anything?"

"Hell, I don't know. That's not what you whisked me out of there for."

"No." She hesitated. "Look, Daniel, I had a couple of hours this morning to think over the idea of working for the Pentagon, and I think we should take this project."

Yates shook his head vigorously. "I don't trust him. I don't really believe he's here for what he says."

"What would he want?"

"I don't know," Yates said angrily. "To compromise us somehow."

"We've done nothing to cross them." She looked down, rubbing the back of one hand with her fingertips. "If the money's real, he's real."

"I don't want their money."

Stowe sighed expressively. "That's all well and good as an ideal — if that's what it is."

"What do you mean?"

"Deanna—"

"She has nothing to do with this."

"I'll take you at your word. Even so — I know we set out to dedicate ourselves to the nuclear freeze, environmental issues, hazardous waste. But you know there's a lot more money on the other side. I don't think what he's talking about would compromise us. In a way, it meshes with what we do."

"How so?"

"Oh, Dan — I know you've got no love for the military. But can't you see? War is the premise, not the point."

"I know that," Yates said, throwing up his hands in surrender. "But there's still something wrong about his being here. Why come to us? They've got their own think tanks, their own internal study teams. We're definitely off the beaten track."

"Maybe he is, too."

"What do you mean?"

"Well — I wonder how many generals go out to interview contractors

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and let contracts."

"You think he's free-lancing? Wants to keep this quiet?"

"Could be."

Yates pursed his lips. "It's not like the air force to start thinking about consequences. Or to have a conscience," he agreed with venomous sarcasm.

"But one officer could. Even a major general."

"I doubt it," Yates said stiffly. "And taking Pentagon money is still wrong for us."

"I don't think so. Not when I have trouble meeting the payroll practically every other month."

"I'll bet his prying told him that," too." There was a long silence in which he avoided her eyes. "We've always found a way to pay the bills, or to deal with not paying them. That's the wrong reason for us to take this."

She pounced on that. "What's the right reason?"

Yates blew an exasperated sigh into one cupped hand.

"Listen, Dan — I think he wants exactly what he says he wants. And it's something we should want, too. You know the state of civil defense in this country. We like to build the weapons, but we don't like to think about the consequences of using them, at least not in human terms. This is a departure from form, and we ought to encourage it. Otherwise we're in the position of refusing to allow the leopard to change its spots."

"I don't want any part of it."

"You won't have, except to sit in on a few meetings for appearances. I'll handle the gruntwork."

Yates studied the earnestness in her expression. "You really want this?"

"Yes. Like you wanted the Consumers Power audit. Because I'd feel badly about turning him away and it not being done, or being done by someone for whom the money is the right reason."

Yates rested his chin on steepled fingers. "All right," he said finally. "You can have your project."

The contract arrived the next day by air force courier, who first obtained their signatures on a security warrant, then turned over a mag-shielded box and a check for two hundred fifty thousand dollars.

"This isn't like them, to move this quickly," Yates said suspiciously when the courier left. "What happened to competitive bidding, supplier certification — the bureaucratic manna?"

"Hiring a consultant isn't like buying B-2 bombers," Stowe rejoined.

"Apparently not."

The box contained a DOD Standard Data Format diskette and a brief note from Rutledge:

Disk password=Damocles. Do it right.

Yates shrugged. "Let's take a look."

"Let me get a notepad."

They sat side by side at a single

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VDT and watched as Rutledge's war model unrolled:

ACCESS RESTRICTED TO
CLEARANCE LEVEL II AND ABOVE
DO NOT COPY
DOD 345.33.34-6
—SUMMARY OF SCENARIO—

INITIAL ATTACK: U.S.S.R., counterdefense. Targets: Vandenberg, KSC, Unified Space Command, Space Operations Center, High Frontier Command, High Frontier tiers 1 + 2. Mode: Ground targets 1 ea. SS-N-6 Sawfly submarine-launched ballistic missles, total yield approximately 3 megatons (MT), orbital targets nonnuclear ASMs. Warning time: <6 minutes. Coefficient of success: 1.0 ground, 1.0 orbital.

"The man has a nasty imagination," Yates said with a shake of the head. "With the subs that close to the coast, that's practically a sneak attack."

"Which means we'll have to launch on warning," Stowe said. "They can't get presidential authorization in six minutes."

Yates tapped a pencil rhythmically against the desk. "I'd bet we stand pat. Three SLBMs can't threaten the ICBM force. We won't know whether the Soviets are just taking out the High Frontier defense or setting the stage for a real attack."

RESPONSE 1: U.S., counterforce. Targets: space launch centers at Baikonur, Volgograd, Northern Cosmodrome; submarines on station off East (4) and West Coast (2); *Salyut 12*. Mode: Ground targets 1 ea. Minuteman III ICBM 3 x 170-kiloton MIRV, submarines P-3C Orion/ASW, orbital target F-15 Eagle/ASM. Time frame: within 45 minutes of confirmation of attack by IR satellite or equivalent intelligence. Coefficient of success: 0.85 land, 0.62 sea.

"Not on warning," Yates said with a touch of childish pride.

"No," Stowe said quietly through her folded hands. "They're allowing just enough time to get the antisubmarine forces in place."

"Still — the retaliation is less than I would have thought. We're still under twenty megatons. And there's no escalation. Each takes out the other's space flight capacity. What's the nuclear-winter threshold?"

"A hundred megatons. I'll bet it doesn't stop there," Stowe said gloomily.

"Don't take it so damn seriously. It's just a study model."

RESPONSE 2: U.S.S.R., counterforce. Targets: all SAC, ICBM, GLCM squadrons, airburst. Mode: 200 SS-N-6 Sawfly SLBM (1 MT), 200 SS-18 ICBM (20 MT), 200 SS-19 (66 x 570 KT). Time frame: launch on confirmation of Minuteman III launch, impact 6-20 minutes. Coefficient of success: 0.8.

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"Looks like they were ready to go to the wall and we weren't," Yates observed.

"It's too late to get the cruise launchers. They'll be deployed at the first alert," Stowe murmured. "And they've got no chance for the Tridents. Not that it matters. We might as well leave ours in the silos. They've already screwed up the planetary heat balance. No point to poisoning everybody as well."

"Dreamer."

RESPONSE 3: U.S., counterpopulation. Targets: all cities > 50,000 population. Mode: 240 ± 40 Trident C4 (8 x 100 KT), 190 ± 60 Poseidon C3 (10 x 50 KT), 440 ± 100 cruise missles (GLCM, ALCM), all groundburst (target list follows). Time frame: > 90 minutes < 6 hours. Coefficient of success: 0.95.

—TARGET LIST FOLLOWS—
—CASUALTY ESTIMATES AND DISTRIBUTION FOLLOW—
—DAMAGE ESTIMATES AND DISTRIBUTION FOLLOW—

"A revenge attack, that's all that is. Good one, too — look at that coefficient. Empty the fuckin' silos, boys, it's the bottom of the ninth and we're down a run," Yates said with cold humor. "Isn't that just like them?"

"Why the delay, I wonder?"

Yates shrugged. "The ninety-minute minimum could be retargeting time. The six hours — maybe that's how long he figures it'll take us to work up to a useless gesture. Or be forced into it by our allies and our generals' definition of manhood."

"Or how long it'll take the cabinet to get out of Washington," Stowe said, and they laughed hollowly together.

Yates pushed his chair back and stood up. "That's enough to satisfy my curiosity. I'm not interested in looking at all the details."

"I think maybe Keith and Barb would be the best ones to take this and draw out the survival parameters," she offered.

"If you want. Let's watch the hours, though. We've got other commitments to meet."

"I know. But he wants to see something next week, and he's already advanced us expenses."

"You can use a data base search for the problem-definition report."

"Already under way."

Five copies of the two-inch thick, five-hundred plus-page report *NUCLEAR WAR SURVIVAL: Parameters and Options* were stacked up by Rutledge's seat at the conference table. The general settled in the chair, picked up the top copy, and regarded it dubiously.

"We're prepared to summarize the key points of the study for you, and then of course you'll need some time to digest it," Stowe said helpfully.

Rutledge folded back the cover

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and thumbed past the first few pages. "Just sit there while I look it over. I don't need someone to tell me what I can read myself," he said curtly. For the next twenty minutes, Rutledge paged through the report, skipping large sections, stopping occasionally to read a passage in its entirety.

While he did so, Yates sat watching him with hands folded in his lap, swiveling back and forth in his padded executive's chair. *You getting the message yet? You reading between the lines? You can't save them. The only useful thing you can do is not fight the war.*

At last Rutledge snapped the binder closed and dropped it back on top of the others. "What the hell is going on here?"

True to form, Yates thought smugly. *I knew anger would be the first emotion we'd see from you.*

"Pardon me?" Stowe asked, looking up in surprise from her notepad.

"I thought you people were supposed to be good. There's nothing new here. This is a rehash of the same crap I could have gotten from FEMA or Army Civil Preparedness. Highway tunnels in Pennsylvania. Railway tunnels in the Rockies. Abandoned salt mines. Bomb shelters under the patio, for Chrissake."

Stowe laid down her pen. "It's necessary that we get a sense of direction from you as to where you want us to take this—"

"Goddammit, I told you last week what I wanted. And I told you that we were short on time. So you wasted a week on this idiocy."

"General—" Stowe said tentatively. "I thought you understood that this would be an interim report, so you can steer us in the direction you want to go. These studies proceed cooperatively—"

"I don't have the time to handhold. You're supposed to be able to make judgments and decisions. That's what you're being paid for."

Yates took over. "Not without knowing what kind of financial and administrative commitment you're prepared to make. We want to keep this study in the real world, after all."

Rutledge looked unconvinced, but the tone of his words moderated. "I told you about that, too. I want more than a paper study. That's why I picked you people. You follow through. You get your hands dirty."

"And we'll follow through for you. But you've got to put some parameters on it," Yates said. "What's the ceiling? Who's going to implement this thing?"

"Dammit, why don't you listen? You're going to implement it. If something needs to be built or bought or someone needs to be hired, you'll see to it. So keep that in mind. This has to be do-able," he said, and paused to gnaw at his lower lip. "As for the ceiling, there is none. Not if what you decide on makes sense to me."

"A million? Two million?" Yates asked carefully.

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"Of five hundred million, or a billion — if that's what it takes."

"And the only one we have to sell is you?" Yates asked carefully.

"That's right. And so far I'm not buying. So tell me where you're going with this now, and when I can expect some real results."

Stowe looked at Yates for a cue but got none. "I've got one hang-up about the model," she said slowly. "I thought High Frontier was supposed to protect us from an ICBM attack. Why can't it protect itself? You've got the coefficient of success at 1.00 for the first attack."

"High Frontier has to be operational to have any impact," Rutledge said.

"You mean you're modeling on the present—" Stowe stopped in mid-sentence and stared. "You're serious about this. Not five or ten years down the road. This model is for today."

"Yes."

"And the time constraint — you're talking about between now and next March, when High Frontier is finished." Stowe's face was pale.

Rutledge shook his head. "Not exactly. The announced operational date is next March, true. The actual operational date is this November, when the Command and Control center is ready. If the Soviets are going to do anything about not letting us complete it, they're going to do it in the next six months."

"How likely do you think that is?"

"If I thought it *un*likely, I wouldn't be here. Let's just say if I were the editor of the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists,* I'd move the hands up to about thirty seconds to midnight." Rutledge stood up and shoved the stack of reports across the table toward Yates. The one Rutledge had been reading toppled into Yates's lap.

"You see, I don't want it soon because I'm impatient. I want it soon because we're running out of time."

When the door closed behind Rutledge, Yates chuckled under his breath, then gathered himself together and rose to leave the room.

"Do you have to go?" Stowe asked, catching him by the arm. "I'd like to have you for a few minutes to bounce around some ideas."

Yates cocked his head questioningly at her pensive expression. "He hasn't infected you with his paranoia, has he?"

"I thought the six-month deadline was because he wanted to spend the money before the end of the fiscal year," she said, walking around the table and gathering up the reports. "I didn't think it was anything like this."

"Anything like what? That scenario is ludicrous. The Soviets will have the first-strike capability with or without the High Frontier. It's going to be able to knock down only 50 percent of the missiles at best. They don't have

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to start a war over it."

There was a series of hollow thuds as she unceremoniously dropped the binders into the waste container by the door. "How do they know it's going to be only 50 percent effective? Because critics in Congress said so? Because a few pretty-boy science popularizers said so? Because the build-down alliance said so? If I were the Soviets, I wouldn't take that at face value."

"They're not dummies. They've got their own technical experts, and the basic technologies of the system are no secret. They can add up the numbers just like we can."

"Then why does Rutledge obviously think otherwise?"

Yates frowned. "Hell, because that's the way people like him are trained to think. What, you think he knows something?"

"There're only ten major commands, and they trust him enough to give him one of them. He travels in the right circles to know."

"And what he knows makes him think we need some survivor's insurance?" Yates' tone was skeptical.

"Maybe. Look, that's not what I wanted to talk about, anyway," Stowe said with a wave of her hand. "This thing breaks up nicely into two problems: how and what. How do we get a CARE package to the survivors, and what do we put in it? Since the *what* is entirely dependent on the *how*, I think I'd better go ahead and start working on that aspect."

Yates shrugged. "Your decision. For the taxpayers' sake alone, we'll have to give him *some* value for his money. I just don't want to see it interfere with the Lilly study."

"I'll meet my other deadlines," Stowe promised. "But can I ask you to do some thinking about what should go in the caches? Not that I'm trying to draw you into this, but I would like to get your input."

"Sure," Yates said offhandedly as he headed for the door. "But not today, huh? I've got work to do."

The halls of the LSF suite were darkened and quiet by the time hunger drove Yates to clear off his desk and go home. He locked his desk and disk file, then, keys jangling in his hand, headed down the main corridor to the entrance. En route, he saw a line of light at the bottom of the door to Stowe's office, and pushed it open. The associate director was seated sideways on the couch, shoes off and legs up, a notepad on her lap and an open can of Pepsi on the floor beside her.

"Ready to pack it in? I could stand a beer."

Peeling back a cuff, Yates looked at his watch. "Almost seven."

"Think I'll stay on a bit," Stowe said, stifling a yawn.

Yates glanced at the top sheet in the portfolio open in front of her. He read her neat block-printed column

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headings upside down:

SURVIVABILITY ACCESSIBILITY

A long list of notes in Stowe's symmetrical handwriting filled the rest of the sheet.

Shrugging, Yates backed out of the room. "Suit yourself."

When he reached the parking lot, he looked back up at the second floor. The window of Stowe's office was the only one in the entire west face of the building bright with light.

"Bernadette, my sweet, you still haven't learned not to always volunteer for the front lines," he said softly. "You've got to pick your fights, and that one's not ours."

Then, shaking his head as though faced with the incomprehensible, Yates climbed into his car and drove away.

Two mornings later Yates arrived before 8 A.M. to find a blue air force sedan again parked in the walkway spot. On seeing it, Yates hurried inside and upstairs.

He found Stowe and Rutledge just settling into chairs in the conference room.

"Daniel," Stowe said with a nod. "Glad you could make it."

"I thought you didn't need to see us until Friday," Yates said to Rutledge, taking a nearby seat.

"I asked the general to come in," Stowe said quietly. "I may have a recomendation for packaging a survival cache."

"May have?" Rutledge asked, a warning tone in his voice. "I didn't come here for more double-talk and indecision."

Stowe tossed her head. "You won't get any. I think I have an excellent solution to the problem you posed. But there're certain requirements I'm not sure you'd be able to meet. I wanted to find out from you immediately, so that I didn't spend any more time on this solution if it proved to be impractical."

Rutledge nodded to himself and waved a hand. "Go ahead."

"Whatever medium we use, the cache has to be both able to survive the war itself and able to be found easily afterward. The problem is that those two factors cut against each other. There're a lot of places you could put something and know it was going to get through all right: buried in the middle of Indiana cornfields, hidden in salt mines. But it'd be just the wildest luck if they were ever found."

"Hell, you just need some way to tell everyone where they are. You could even put some sort of transmitter on them," Yates suggested.

"Yes — but then you'd have to assume that the survivors have working radios, and we're better off making as few optimistic assumptions as necessary. And if you think it through, I

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don't think you'll want to publicize the existence or location of the caches until they're needed."

Fine. See if I open my mouth again.

"So what, then?" Rutledge asked.

"I'm thinking along the lines of putting the caches in water. Some sort of neutral-buoyancy canister that you anchor below the surface like a mine. You could put them all along the continental shelf and in the major lakes and rivers. As soon as the first one's found, word'd spread pretty fast."

Stowe's rebuff had made Yates contentious. "Aren't you writing off the Great Plains?"

"To some degree. Most of the population lives on the coasts or near a major river. With municipal water systems destroyed, the survivors will come to natural water supplies eventually."

"Yes," Rutledge said, interested.

"The problem is that the places where you'd want to put the caches are also heavily used for recreation — swimming, fishing, boating. "Putting them there would raise a lot of questions you might not want to answer, not to mention the possibility of vandalism."

Rutledge wagged a finger in the air. "I still like it. You could avoid some complications if you just deployed them at the last possible moment."

"But that leads to all sorts of logistic problems in storage, production, the manpower and organization needed to deploy them," she said.

Rutledge tapped his service insignia. "You forget whom you're working for. How big would these be?"

"They could be any size, but I'd recommend restricting them to a size one person could recover. Say a meter in diameter, fifty or sixty kilograms."

"Then we could just drop them out of the back of C-119s. Make them float. Don't anchor them at all," Rutledge said, sitting back. "I presume you'd fill them with penicillin, high-protein foods—"

"Medical supplies would probably be a low priority. If the nuclear winter hypothesis is correct, the greatest needs would be food for the present and seed stocks for the future. I do have one serious concern, though. I'd estimate a 40 percent wastage rate if the caches are floating free—"

"But they'd be simpler to make and more reliable." Yates interjected. "So we'll just deploy more of them."

She glared at him for interrupting. "I was going to say that if they're all the same, that's acceptable. But if you've got something of special importance, that method won't do at all."

Rutledge sat forward. "What do you mean, something of special importance?"

"Well — why shouldn't some art objects survive? What's the most val-

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uable thing the nation owns? The original Constitution? Maybe we want to send a medical data base instead of a few syringes of broad-spectrum antibiotics. Dan's looking at stocking the caches. He might have other ideas."

Rutledge looked to Yates. "Well, Doctor? What about it? What would you send?"

Yeah, she asked me, but I haven't given it a thought since. Thanks for putting me on the spot, Bernie. "How are you going to package the 'special' caches, Dr. Stowe?" he asked, ducking Rutledge's question.

"In satellites," she said. "Big dumb satellites launched into unstable polar elliptic orbits — orbiting the earth the way a comet might orbit the sun. Very bright reflective coating, so that every time one reaches perigee, it draws attention in the night sky. A nice low perigee so that the atmosphere eventually drags it down. An ablative coating contaminated with nodules of copper and strontium chloride so that the fireball is green and scarlet, and it's not mistaken for a meteor when it comes down. And just enough of a guidance system to see that it come down on land."

I guess that overtime paid off, Yates thought with honest appreciation. *Very nice.*

Rutledge waggled a finger at Stowe. "This is why you called me. You need to know if I could arrange for such a thing to be launched."

She nodded. "We'd be extremely limited in our payload if we had to depend on Space Systems International or even Arianespace, so much so that I'm not sure it's be worth doing. But one shuttle can get us forty thousand pounds into polar orbit from Vandenberg. I think I could get two specials in for that."

"You'd program them to come back here, I presume. If we can't help everyone, then we need to make certain we help our survivors, not theirs."

Stowe nodded agreeably. "We should be able to target the North American continent as easily as any. The east coast, I would think, though we'll want to look at targeting and the distribution of our floaters."

Steepling his fingers, Rutledge stared into the tabletop for a long moment. "Time," he said finally. "Do you have enough time to do both, the floaters and the specials? We're looking at thirty, maybe forty-five days."

What happened to the six months? Yates wondered idly.

"The floaters will be ready. I've felt out two suppliers, and if I get them plans tomorrow, they'll start turning them out by the first of next week. The floaters are really pretty simple — a counterweight, a marker flag, a compartmented interior, and a pictograph that shows you how to open it. If you're ready to authorize an overtime contract—"

"Done." Rutledge squinted at Yates. "Where are you, Doctor? You

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haven't said much. In fact, I get the impression you aren't really involved in this project."

Yates rocked back and folded his hands in his lap. "I suppose that's because I have trouble taking it seriously," he answered honestly.

"Any particular reason?"

"Lots of them. For one, I can't buy into your scenario. Everyone knows the High Frontier won't work. I don't believe for a minute the U.S.S.R would attack us because of it. That unravels the whole model, including what you want us to do."

Rutledge traced small circles on the tabletop with a fingertip. "I had a teammate like you once, missing his routes, cutting up. Game time came, and he played like a champion. He just couldn't take practice seriously. But when the pressure was on—"

His gaze flicked up from the tabletop to Yates's eyes. "You've been jerkin' me around. We're running out of time, and you're jerkin' me around. Dr. Stowe there knows this is the game, not the practice, but you're looking the other way."

"Do you want me to believe that scenario's anything more than a paper exercise?"

"Yes." Flint-gray eyes burned into sky-blue ones. "You don't know anything about DOD security, or you'd realize that I have access to Class II materials but I can't show them around or grant anyone else Class II clearance. And I told you last time that the U.S.S.R is afraid of High Frontier. Maybe I'd better tell you why."

"Because they're paranoid, just like you," Yates said with a smirk and a shrug.

"No. Because some of the High Frontier satellites are carrying orbit-to-ground nuclear weapons. And the Soviets know it."

The smirk slowly faded as Yates's eyes widened in shock. Then his lips curled in an expression of virulent hatred and he came up out of his seat. "You fuckin' idiots!" he screeched, shaking both clenched fists in front of him. "You goddamn snakebrain sons of bitches put *nukes* in orbit? Sweet Jesus—" His voice trailing off to a whimper, he squeezed his eyes closed as if in pain, and melted back down into his chair.

Though equally shaken, Stowe allowed herself no such display. She folded trembling hands together and brought them slowly to her mouth, and then her body went rigid.

"I won't defend the decision," Rutledge continued in a soft voice. "It wasn't mine to make, and I think it was the wrong one. But it was made at the very top."

"The Joint Chiefs of Staff?" Stowe asked in an unsteady voice.

"No. At the *very* top."

"Why?" It was question, plaint, and protest all in one.

"They believed they had to do something to counter the U.S.S.R.'s advantage — 2-1 in launchers and 3-1

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advantage in throw weight, 5-1 in most conventional weapons. That plays on you after a while. And Congress kept knocking down almost every new system and giving away all the secrets on the few they approved. So we hid the funds for Damocles in the High Frontier project."

"Damocles," she echoed.

"You shouldn't have told us," Yates croaked at last. "I can't keep quiet about this. I've got to get it out."

"No, you don't," Rutledge said, standing. "Unless you want to be the cause of the war. Negotiations are under way at the highest level. You and I have to pray they succeed. But this can't be fought out in public. Neither side would be able to be flexible. Once everyone knows the warheads are there, the president would lose the option of ordering them removed. He can't back down to the Soviets publicly. So hold your tongue, Dr. Yates — and get to work."

When the door clicked shut, Yates and Stowe sat beside each other for an interminable minute, isolated by their inexpressible thoughts, frozen by an overwhelming helplessness. Then, without warning, Yates leaped to his feet, toppling his chair backward onto the floor, and fled the room without a word.

"Daniel!" she called out after him.

But it was not enough to slow his flight, though she followed and repeated the call down the stairwell. He took the steps three and four at a time as though pursued by a demon, and when he drove away, tires and engine cried out protests that might have been his own.

Yates sat on his heels before the white marble cross and fingered the carved grooves of the lettering on the crosspiece. Around him, seventy thousand similar crosses stood in coldly precise lines and rows on the gently rolling land, acre after acre of moldering bodies lying as regimented in death as in life.

Deanna R. Yates
Specialist 7th Airborne
May 13, 1990 Estanzueles, El Salvador

"Do you know how much I hate it here, Dee?" he said softly, withdrawing his hand. "Do you know what this place says to me? All the puffy-cheeked mothers and dutiful sons, the wet-eyed wives and fathers, all the lies they tell themselves and each other. Honorable death. Noble cause. I wouldn't have let them leave you here, little sister. If it had been up to me—"

I always talk to you as though you were still alive. Why is that, Dee? There's nothing here but the cloak your spirit wore. Why don't I go to the last place I saw you alive and try to catch a memory there? But I come here, where all I can see is them folding the flag and handing it to Mom.

"If there were to be any point in

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what happened to you, it would be if they learned enough from the small wars not to fight the big one." His voice broke and he bit at his lower lip, the corners of his eyes wet with incipient tears. "But it's beginning to look like there wasn't any point to any of it. Not to your dying, or my living, or any of what we've done."

With a forlorn wail, Yates pitched forward and pounded his clenched fists against the unyielding ground. He fought the tears, but they came nonetheless, his tortured sobs marking the struggle and leaving him weak and aching. It was a long several minutes before he sat upright again.

"Oh, God. Don't they know?" he demanded of the dead in a voice thick with anguish and anger, spreading his arms wide to include the skeletal crosses from horizon to horizon. "Don't they realize what they stand to lose? Don't they understand how improbable we are?"

He held his own hands out before him and studied them as though seeing them for the first time, moving his thumb and each finger in turn. "A cosmic alchemist's triumph, gifted with eyes that see beauty and minds that create it," he said reverently. "Oh, Dee. It's more than the body dying. You could tell them how little that means. But they're going to kill the spirit of what we were — of what we wanted to be. God, we're never going to go to the stars—"

With a keening cry, he flung his arms around the cross, clutching it as he would have hugged Deanna, flattening his tear-slick cheek against its smooth, cold surface. Great sobs tore through him, escaping as explosive gasps and whimpers.

A hand on his shoulder that was not his own, a soothing voice repeating his name, and at length Yates lifted his head.

"Bernie," he said with an unhappy laugh.

She crouched beside him. "Here," she said, opening her arms, and he gave up the grave marker's embrace for hers. They cried quietly together for a while, neither saying anything. Presently Yates pulled away.

"You followed me?"

"I knew where you'd go." She held his hands in hers. "It hasn't happened yet. It might not."

He flashed a maudlin smile. "You were always the realist in this partnership. Don't try to change your spots now."

Brushing his cheek with the back of one hand, she answered, "Even realists are allowed hope, Dan."

He cast his eyes downward, and in the moment of silence that followed, both heard the sound of birds in a nearby tree and traffic on a distant road.

"You know, I figured out why you hang your diplomas and I don't," he said, grinning crookedly. "Maybe it's some of the extra baggage that goes with being a damned good-looking

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woman — it was always important to you that people knew you came in the front door, that you were there on merit."

"I'm just a gold-star girl at heart," she said with a tender smile. "And you hide yours away because you don't want to belong to any club that'd have you as a member. Come on, Dan. Let's go. This isn't helping you any."

He used the cross as a crutch to pull himself to his feet, then helped her up as well. "Or anyone else, h'm? Can you meet me back at the office?"

"Of course—"

"Thanks. I'm going to need some help getting caught up before I'll be any use to you."

For two months they heard nothing from General Rutledge except acknowledgments through his staff: one hundred water caches received at Andrews for the Chesapeake, three hundred received at Grissom for the lower Great Lakes. Stowe located two Hughes 570 modular satellite chassis about to be shipped to AT&T, and flew to California to buy them away from their owner. She stayed to supervise their conversion into her special caches.

Yates remained in Maryland, but called her daily, both to keep track of her progress and for reinforcement they both needed. Of his own progress, there was little to report. Deciding what was to go in the specials was a burden rather then a privilege, and the enormity of the responsibility led him to procrastinate. It was values and ethics class all over again: What do you take to a desert island? What do you rescue from a burning house? And do your choices describe a person you're comfortable being?

Choosing not for himself but for Bernie and his parents and the women he was dating and even General Rutledge (he would not allow himself to think in terms of choosing for Earth's 5 billion strangers), Yates assembled an imposing list of possibilities and proceeded to raise ambivalence to a high art. He comforted himself with the thought that Stowe's hardware was the pacing item; unless and until the satellites were ready, the question of their cargo remained academic.

Steady progress on the satellites did not make him any more decisive; the pacing item became the availability of a launcher. His calls on that subject found Rutledge "not available," and the general failed to return them. Aftr a week of waiting, Yates pressed the issue in person.

Deep worry lines and dark circles under the eyes made Rutledge look older than when Yates had last seen him. "What are you here for?"

Taking a chair without being invited, Yates answered, "I could do with some good news."

Rutledge shook his head solemnly. "There is none."

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"You said they were negotiating—"

"Talks are stalled. No, they're worse then stalled, they're frosty. And construction goes on."

"Why? The least we could do is hold the status quo."

"The official wisdom is that the Soviets won't act," Rutledge said wearily. "The truth is that now that we've finally got the advantage, we're not willing to give it up."

"What are you telling me?"

He toyed with a pencil before answering. "That we've got two weeks, maybe three, before it all goes up. It's out of control. And there isn't anything that you or I or even the people'll that'll give the orders can do about it. The Joint Chiefs would rather use those warheads than give them up, and they've got the president convinced the Soviets are bluffing. Everyone will make what they think is the only right decision, and it'll all add up to one very wrong decision. And if there's justice in this universe, they'll have at least a few hours to regret their part in it."

"We can get the specials launched. We can do that much."

"There's not enough time."

"Damn you, don't you quit on us! Do you think we took your six months as a promise? Bernie's been working twenty-hour days—"

"And she's done a good job. We've got almost fifteen hundred water caches ready to deploy."

"The water caches are Band-Aids. The specials are what really matter. What have you done about manifesting them on a DOD shuttle?"

"Nothing—"

Yates came to his feet and slammed his hands palm-down on the desk in front of Rugledge. "Why the hell not? You sang us a song about following through, and now you don't."

Rutledge cocked his head and looked up at Yates. The intensity of the younger man's expression seemed to pain him. "You're still angry. I envy you that. I've gone past angry to something less fulfilling," he said with uncharacteristic gentleness. "I did nothing because I had no reason to believe you could be ready. Now that I know differently, I'll make some calls. Go ask Mary to get us both some coffee, yes?"

Yates returned in five minutes to find Rutledge standing behind his newly cleared desk, pulling on an overcoat.

"You've got *Explorer* for a flight on the sixteenth. That's eight days. Can you be ready?

"We'll be ready. Tell them to mount two 570-series cradles—"

Rutledge pressed a card torn from a Rolodex into Yates's hand as he moved past toward the door. "Tell them yourself. I've told them to expect you. I have other responsibilities to deal with. This is in your hands now."

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"I've been wondering if I was ever going to see you," Stowe said, clutching Yates's arm as she joined him in the otherwise empty observation stands three miles from the Vandenberg shuttle pad.

"Did you get the payloads integrated?"

"I wouldn't be here if I hadn't. But I had no chance to get inside them. What are we sending up?"

"Not enough," Yates said in a faraway voice. "Not enough." He glanced at the electronic clock. "Coming out of the hold."

"Oh, hell. You can tell me later. I don't want to think about anything now except that we're going to make it. We're going to get them off," she said with a happy sigh. "I've worked harder on those birds than I've ever worked on anything in my life. And I've never wanted more for something I did to be totally unnecessary. Did you talk to Rutledge before you left? Where do we stand?"

"Rutledge dropped out of sight — went somewhere with his family."

"That's not good."

"I don't know. He seemed — I don't know." Yates squinted in the direction of the pad. "There goes the oxygen vent arm."

"Just a couple of minutes, then. I remember watching the first launches on TV as a kid," she said wistfully. "I knew the countdown sequence by heart."

They clung to each other in a fierce but asexual embrace as the last seconds ticked away.

"I've had a standing offer from Philip Cortieri for ten years to watch the gray whale migration off the Baja, but never took him up on it," Yates said as the clock reached 0:10. "When we're done here, how about going down there with me?"

She smiled wistfully. "Sure."

"If you can handle scuba gear, we can watch them from underwater. I'd like to get close."

"Maybe even hitch a ride?"

"Maybe."

Steam like white cotton billowed from the south side of the pad as a flicker of yellow marked the ignition of the main engines. At 0:00, the shuttle rose off the pad and hurtled southward atop a dense pillarlike cloud lit from within by a furious white fire.

"Fantastic. Go go go go go," Yates murmured, and then the tsunami of sound washed over them and drowned out his urgings.

The echoes of the shuttle's departure were still rumbling when Stowe tugged at Yates's sleeve and pointed at an arcing contrail high in the western sky.

"What's that?" she asked.

Yates shielded his eyes with a hand and studied the phenomenon with a sinking heart.

"There's another one," she said suddenly. "Daniel—"

They watched the incoming mis-

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siles impassively, conscious of the futility of flight or protest. A halo of light more intense than a million shuttle engines blinded them, and the radiation that accompanied it burned them where they stood, consciousness fleeing an endless instant after agony enveloped them.

But it was the death they would have chosen. For before long, the silo-studded plains were burning, and the cities that were home to pilots and sailors and soldiers were burning, and the furnacelike columns of air the wildfires created thrust their burdens of smoke and ash into the highest regions of the atmosphere, where they merged into a spreading cloud that turned day to twilight and then to night.

And then winter came to the world.

II

Though the body of Garivan was beginning to smell strongly — having been dead a day even before being packed, cradled on Tola's shoulders like a felled deer, cross-country to the Lonega family's homehill — the ceremony was postponed until twilight, the customary time. In the intervening hours, Tola went to the stream to bathe, and Ledell, the keeper of stories, went with him to hear and commit to memory the death-tale. But there would be little glory in the retelling, for there was no glory in death by *dark* — the fickle scythe with a hundred different faces. This time it had hardly marked Garivan's skin, instead making black blood run endlessly from his bowels until he was a hollow shell of agony.

Garivan's two surviving brothers meanwhile made a bier. As befit a provider and the first son of a Twelvenames, its frame was stout needle wood, laced and then crisscrossed with climbing vine.

The Twelvenames herself retired to her cupa alone, descending the notched log ladder into the domelike circular chamber without a word. Kenman, her husband prime, sat dutifully on the spider weed surrounding the cupa's smoke hole in case she should call for him. He did not expect a call to come. Belinda Twelvenames had outlived five of her children, and always she had found what she needed inside herself.

When twilight came on, the clacking of hollow rotwood sticks called the Lonega to the ring of sitting rocks that made the sky circle. The bier bearing the body of Garivan was hoisted high on the shoulders of his brothers and carried into the center of the circle, where four fist-thick, waist-high stumps, each notched at the top, jutted up from the bare earth. Atop them the bearers placed their burden, then stepped away to where the rest of the family stood waiting.

There was silence in the circle as Belinda Twelvenames came forward

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and gripped her son's cold, stiff hand. In a voice younger than the forty years she wore with quiet dignity, she began to sing Garivan's song.

Garivan's song had no words, only the clear, unburdened notes that were the person who was gone — the soothing melodies that as an infant he had found pleasing, the happy sounds to which he had first given voice, the brief themes that evoked his gentle personality, and the never-before-heard cadence of his painful dark-death.

When the song was ended, Belinda raised her head to the family. "A Lonega lies dead. I call on his family to remember him."

Since Belinda herself was beyond the age of breeding, she passed the right of first claim to Alice-Tonda-Ken, gravid with her third child. Alice-Tonda-Ken sang the first phrases of the family's song of remembrance, then placed one hand on Garivan's lifeless torso and the other on her swollen belly.

"What was good in you lives on. I take your love of the chase for my child," she said, and there was a murmur of approval.

Behind her came Kenman, who with his gravelly voice took up the remembrance song where Alice-Tonda-Ken had stopped.

"What was good in you lives on," he said clearly and loudly. "I take the laughter that lightened long travels in your company."

Nine others came forward in turn to make their claims for that which was well thought of in Garivan. The claims were made solemnly, in full recognition of the responsibility of the claimant to make that which was Garivan part of themselves. It was one of the rituals that set the Lonega apart from the other Georgia families — the living remembrance, the preservation of the essence of the dead.

"He is well honored and will be well remembered, Belinda," Kenman said at her side.

"Will you find his body a good resting place, Husband, where it will be devoured undisturbed by men?" she asked, touching his cheek.

He lowered his eyes. "Gratefully."

She raised her arms palm up. "I give his substance to the land that sustains us," she cried out, her voice touched by the first tremulous hint of emotion. "He is and will be with us, always. Open the larder, uncork warm spirits. Tonight we celebrate life."

Everyone in the Georgias knew that Belinda Twelvenames had the magic. She was the only Twelvenames within a month's walking, in large part because of the gift of twinning. Eight times she had been roundbellied, bringing forth eleven healthy children and but a single cull.

The cull had been her first, and the beginning of her legend. In defiance of Eloai, the senior mother at the time, she had given the child a

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name. Though the frail, armless creature died within a month, Belinda placed the dried, blackened stub of its umbilical cord in a pouch on her belt as though she had bred a healthy child, ignoring Eloai's warnings that to do so was to invite barrenness.

Now there were a dozen proofs in the pouch, and Belinda Twelvenames was senior mother of the Lonega. Despite her age, she still kept four husbands, and could have had many more. Suitors young and old from other families still came calling on the Twelvenames offering gifts and making chivalrous entreaties.

The gifts took as many forms as the suitors, from a fresh hindquarter to a well-made blouse — though it had become known over the years that Belinda favored the works of the small muscles of a maker's head and hands over those of the large muscles of a provider.

When a gift pleased her, she would lie with him who had brought it, as was her prerogative. But she asked none to stay. They went away grateful nonetheless, for all knew that the Twelvenames' magic was contagious, and they would reap the benefit when they returned to their own homehill.

In the same vein, Belinda's husbands were nearly as much in demand as Belinda herself, being asked to bring nothing more to the mating than a tiny bit of her gift. Custom gave Belinda a veto, and when the breeder was a Lonega, the answer was always no. But from time to time, Belinda would unmarry Kern or Av or Denis, freeing them to go away a day or five and visit another family. Kenman alone she kept for herself.

But if the breeding magic was contagious, it was sympathetic as well. Alice-Tonda-Ken was with child again, and Kirsta, Belinda's first daughter, was suckling the child that had made her a Sixnames. Of the family's six breeders, only Tania had yet to bear a normal child, and she was still ten summers from blood-end.

In every wise, the Lonega were rich in children, and the credit accrued to Belinda Twelvenames. But for Belinda herself, it was a mixed blessing. The deathfeast only evoked memories of other children who had died too soon, and before long she withdrew from the festivities and went walking, away from the sky circle and the family's three cupas, down the west slope of the homehill toward the stream. Denis, assuming the duties of first husband in Kenman's absence, followed at a respectful distance.

Though there was but a sliver of moon to light her steps, she moved surefootedly across the shallow stream atop the slender log Av had placed there for her. On the other side of the stream was the meadow, her favorite watching place, and there she slowed and gestured to Denis.

"Let me make a pillow of you," she said, and he came to her. They lay

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down in a bare patch together, and she rested her head on his belly as she looked up at the sky.

"The sun sets late, the Twins set early. Hot days are coming."

"Andor counts six phases to north-sun day," Denis said in an agreeing tone.

"How foolish the sun is, to give the summer all life and warmth and then punish us with the short-day cold," she said with real anger. "How much harder to enjoy the gift of light when we know it will be taken from us."

Denis understood the source of the anger. "Just as the breeder of many will see many deaths."

"I would take a lesser gift that I could keep forever."

Saying nothing, Denis stroked Belinda's smooth, dry forehead. She reached up and caught his hand, then brought it to her mouth to kiss the palm.

"Does our family eat well?"

"Yes, Belinda."

"Are our family's songs strong ones?"

"Yes, Belinda."

"Are our breeders fertile and fecund?"

"Yes, Belinda."

"And is there nothing more to life than that?"

"Those are the highest blessings."

"It seems to me that to have all the highest blessings should bring more happiness."

"Are you unhappy, Belinda?"

"I am triply blessed," she said wearily. "Am I allowed to be unhappy?"

"A Twelvenames is allowed anything."

"So it is said," she agreed.

It was then that the nightfire appeared. Both saw it nearly at once, brighter by far than the brightest star in the sky, brighter than the five planets together, as bright even as the crescent of moon: a brilliant flame arcing up from the hilly north horizon, piercing the bowl of the Great Cup, searing the back of the Serpent, and then vanishing beyond the plains to the south. The entire apparition took but a hundred breaths.

Belinda had seen the nightfire two dozen times throughout her life, but each time she felt the wonder. "Why does it come?" she asked in hoarse whisper when it was gone.

She felt his shrug. "Because it has always come."

"That answer means nothing." She sighed. "Perhaps it comes to light the fires in young hearts, and I am too old to feel the warmth and know."

"Or perhaps it comes to honor the dead son of a Twelvenames," he said gently.

"Do you think me so special that the sky now bows to me?" she demanded with some indignation.

"You have always been deserving."

"You're a foolish man, Denis, foolish and vain." She sat up and began to

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loose her blouse. "Love me," she said, and straddled his groin. Riding his hardness, surrounded by the living Earth and before the watchful eyes of heaven, she replaced her pain with pleasure for a time.

When Belinda awoke the next morning in the cupa, Kenman was sleeping soundly beside her, smelling strongly of sweat and the trail. Sitting up, she saw by the empty bedplaces around the cupa's perimeters that Kern and Denis had already risen, as had Alix-Ellet and her breed-family. Only Alice-Tonda-Ken still slept, a phenomenon becoming more common as she moved into the seventh month.

As Belinda stretched and yawned, Kenman stirred.

"Sleep, my husband," she whispered, bending over to kiss his forehead. Then, gathering a cloak around her against the lingering night chill, she climbed the log ladder to another morning.

A breakfast fire was crackling in the sky circle, tended by Tola and two of the younger providers. Several of the youngest children were playing on the treeless east slope of the homehill, their high voices carrying to Belinda's ears. One of Kirsta's oldest girls walked shyly up to Belinda and offered to brush her hair, and Belinda settled cross-legged on the grass to allow her.

Across the homehill, Denis sat with his back against a tree, pushing green-stained threads through the back of a roughweave shirt as he began a provider's string painting. The sight reminded Belinda that she would have to choose a replacement for Garivan, either by accepting a petition from another family or by promoting one of the craftless children. The latter was more likely, and Kip the probable choice, but she would ask Tola for his thoughts before acting.

By the time breakfast was ready, Kenman had roused himself and joined Belinda.

"What you asked is done," he said as he settled beside her.

She squeezed his hand in acknowledgment, but gave no sign of wanting to hear more. "Did you see the nightfire?" she asked.

"I did."

"Is it just that I grow old, or does the nightfire come more often these past years?"

"I cannot say. I am no watcher."

"I am no watcher, either, yet my memory tells me that when I was a child with the Unicoi, the nightfire came but once or twice a year. When I was eleven, it came three times, once in autumn and twice in spring. Our senior mother worried greatly over it. The next year it did not appear at all."

"The nightfire owns its own spirit, and moves as it chooses."

"So it is said," she said resignedly.

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Five days later the family had just scattered from the high-sun meal when a shout went up from the north slope of the camp, drawing the attention of all within earshot.

"It's Av!" someone called over the hooting and happy laughter.

Belinda stood and took a few tentative steps toward the commotion. it was indeed Av, her youngest husband and one of the family's runners, in a group bear hug with Modris and several others. When he saw Belinda, Av disengaged himself and pushed through to where she stood. His right hand went up with her left, their fingers entwined, and he stepped close to lightly press his cheek against hers.

"Welcome home, Husband," she said softly into his ear.

"They tell me Garivan died the darkdeath," he said. "I am sorry I was not here."

"He is well remembered," she said reassuringly, and stepped back, breaking the formal embrace. They went to the sky circle hand in hand, and Bria, Belinda's youngest, brought Av a bowl of the hot fruit mash. Those who were not needed elsewhere settled on the sitting stones nearby to hear Av's news.

"No stories till all can hear, tonight," Belinda said warningly at the group of eager young ones beginning to gather.

"I have something better than stories," Av said, unhooking a small pouch from his belt. It was his seed bag, in which he carried and scattered along his route the germ of their homehill's plants — a tradition Av had brought with him from the Chats. Usually the seed bag was empty at the end of a run. But from his, Av drew a dozen small, rounded streamstones. Hands cupped, he held them out to Belinda and then, when she had chosen one, to the children.

"Water skippers," one exclaimed.

"Look again," Av instructed, and they obediently scrutinized the stones.

"Mine has a needletree!"

"I have a deer!"

"Look, a killkenny!'

Belinda peered at hers and found a picture scratched in its surface. The scratches were fine and deep, the execution — in her case, of a clawed beetle — skillful.

"This is fine making," she said in a neutral tone.

"I got them from the Cantona, from the hand of a maker named Brian. He takes stones from the Allatoona and makes fertility amulets for his homefamily. A good stone is highly prized there — a breeder will give her stone to her favorite when she reaches blood-end, and men will fight to own a stone that has shown the magic. We have no need of such, nor would he have allowed me them if we had. But he consented to turn his skills to other subjects."

"Did you see the making? How is

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it done?" Belinda asked.

Av squirmed uncomfortably. "A maker has his secrets—"

Belinda thrust the stone before Av's face. "These are made with cutters of shinestone."

"Yes, Belinda."

"Shinestone comes from the time of dark and carries the darkdeath. How can you bring these here as gifts and toys for children?" she demanded.

"These are streamstone, not shinestone," Av protested. "They carry nothing but their maker's mark."

She looked to Kenman, then to Denis. Both wore looks that said, *"You can forbid it, but you lose more than you gain.* The look on Av's face said something else, something cautionary, something conspiratory.

"Yes. This is fine making," she repeated, slipping the stone into a pocket. "You were thoughtful to bring them for us. Thank Av, children. Then leave us."

The adults retired to the fire circle of Belinda's cupa for privacy. It was a full council — besides Av, there was Belinda, Kenman, Kirsta Sixnames and her senior husband, and all the firsts of the crafts: Andor, Tola, Ledell, Elul the maker, Modris the guardian. Because she was just rising, Alice-Tonda-ken was there as well.

"I was surprised to hear that you had gone far enough south to visit the Cantona. The news is bad?" Belinda asked.

"The news is bad," said Av.

"Begin at the beginning. You visited the Gaddis," Belinda said. The Gaddis' homehill lay just less than a day's run to the north, in the wooded hills. "How did you find them?"

"It is as Adrian said," Av replied, naming the family's youngest runner. "Their songs are fading, Belinda. Their first maker is dead and his tools lie unused. The children are thin and rarely laugh. They have only three breeders, who cannot keep the family in milk."

"Who is senior mother now?"

"Sylva-Mark-Juniper."

"A breeder of two is senior mother?" Kenman shook his head. "What became of Dione Sevennames?"

"Bitten by a clawed beetle last summer and died of the froths. Sylva was her eldest."

"But not the keeper of her remembrance, it would seem," Belinda mused.

"No. She is flush with a senior's privilege and does not see what has happened."

"Bad news, indeed, Av. The Gaddis have a fine homehill and a good heart," Kenman said.

"They are in danger of losing both."

"Perhaps there is some way to help them," Kenman said, with a brief sideways glance at Alice-Tonda-Ken, who was seated on the second tier. "We are strong enough to share some of our substance."

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"We will talk of it at another time," Belinda said firmly. "Continue, Av."

"You have heard the best of it already. I had hoped to continue on to the Blue Ridge. But the Gaddis warned me that there has been fighting among the lake families, and the black flag hangs along the runs."

Belinda shook her head. "The lake land is as rich as any in the Georgias, yet they fight like killkennies over a dinner scrap."

"They must have a poor excuse for a keeper, if he allows them to forget the lessons of the time of dark," said Ledell, defending his craft. "There is more lost in fighting for food than gained in winning."

"It's not food they fight over," Modris said. "If they were hungrier, perhaps they would not have the time to think of such foolishness."

"There's truth in that," Av agreed. "Sylva says that the senior mothers have allowed their husbands too great a voice in the family's life."

"An eternal danger," Belinda said, directing a smile and a sideways glance toward Kenman. "Where did you go, then, with the runs to the north closed to you?"

"To Ellijay," he said, to their surprise.

A runner away from his homehill has much time for thinking, and as he covered the leg-numbing miles in the long shadow from the western hills, he thought of his destination: Ellijay.

Nearly all of what he knew came from Ledell's stories. Ellijay was, literally, a daughter family of the Lonega, founded on the east shore of Carter Lake by Belinda's breed-sister Maryn. The division had been amicable, and many of the Lonega had breed-relations there: Kenman had a brother, Kirsta Sixnames a son and daughter, Belinda two sons, Elul a sister.

For all that, contact between the families was infrequent. Maryn was several summers older than Belinda, and with three good pregnancies before she was twenty, had had reason to think about being senior mother of the Lonega someday. But the three healthy boys were followed by an equal number of culls, just as Belinda was beginning her string of twins. At the time of Eloai's death, Maryn had but four children to Belinda's eight, earning the younger the right of succession.

With the title came problems Eloai had left unsolved. The family's two cupas were crowded and a third was needed. But the spring had come cold and dry, and those who might have built the new earth lodge were busy with the task of providing. The addition of Maryn's resentment in that situation could well have been incendiary.

Belinda resolved all three problems with one wise decision that cemented her claim to be senior mother. The split relieved the crowding

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and the pressure on the Lonega's foraging range, and took the proud Maryn out of her younger sister's shadow.

Maryn had seen to it that the new family's homehill was more than three days away on a difficult run, and made the distance seem greater by sending out her own runners but rarely. Belinda reciprocated, allowing Maryn the independence she craved. Av's visit would be the first in four summers and only the third he could recall.

If he could find them, that was. Av was dependent on the reliability of Ledell's directions and the sightings he took of the dayrise and dayset, since he had never made that run before. He had followed the valley southwest from Gaddis, detouring through hilly country and picking up the blackrock run the second day. He had only to find the great lake and then work his way along the shore to its northeastern end.

Or so the senior runner from the Gaddis had said — though by the look of him it had been several summers and many meals since he had done any running.

"Stay to the blackrock runs," he had said. "You'll see the lake and the fires of the Ellijay clearly from it."

Despite his misgivings, Av complied as well as he could. Twice he lost the blackrock — once for more than an hour — and twice he found branches he was not expecting, and had to guess at which to follow. Finally the run ended on the bank of a briskly moving stream that seemed large enough to feed a good-sized lake.

The light was fading as the sun's disk neared the peaks of the next range of hills. But his view west into the valley was unobstructed, and he saw neither sun-sparkled water nor curling smoke plume. Certain he was lost, Av followed the stream west in the hope it would lead him to the lake.

He was still walking and hoping an hour later when he came upon an abandoned cupa.

Dug into the ground and then roofed over with needlewood planks and earth, a cupa gives little sign of its presence apart from the smoke hole. That is especially true of an older one, where the shallow dome of the roof is covered with a natural scattering of needles or growth of spidergrass. Summer cool and winter warmth are the goals, but deception is often the effect. It is the presence of people and the activity aboveground that mark a homehill for what it is.

There was none of that as Av came upon his discovery. There was only a creak of warning and the shifting of the ground beneath his feet. Av tried to scramble clear, but there was nothing solid under him, and he dropped heavily into darkness along with a cascade of dry soil and splintered wood.

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Immediately he bounced to his feet and drew his jasper knife from a belt pouch. He peered into the dimly lit recesses of the cupa, choking on the powdery dust kicked up by the fall. Humans were not the only form of life to find the cupa a congenial home. Among the frequent secondary tenants was the razor-toothed kilkenny, which could negotiate a smoke hole ladder as agilely on its four clawed pads as a human could on two skin-wrapped feet.

Nothing moved, and no eyes glinted back at him.

Still wary, he clambered out of the hole. When he was standing in the light again, he called the runner's recognition call. No answer came.

He spotted a second cupa a few dozen strides farther on, and crawled to the edge of its smoke hole. There was no ladderlog, and the darkness inside was complete.

Av was confused. If this was Ellijay, where were the people? But it could not be Ellijay, for where was the lake? He would have to go into the cupa for answers, and for that he needed light.

Rather than wait for tomorrow's mid-morning sun, he ran to the nearest west-facing slope and climbed a hundred steps, until he could see the disk of the sun between two peaks and feel its fading warmth. With his fireglass, he focused that warmth on a bed of needles, until they smoked and burst into flame. A stout stick with a long strip of bark wrapped around one end made a passable torch.

Returning, he thrust the torch through the smoke hole of the intact cupa. Immediately the rattle of chiton broke the silence of the chamber, and Av saw the furtive shapes of a band of clawed beetles as they skittered away from the light. He also saw what had drawn them there: a formless scattering of skeletons on the dirt floor of the cupa. There were large bones and small bones and the palm-sized empty backshells of a hundred or more dead beetles. But except for the ladder, lying across the fire pit where it had fallen, the chamber was bare of all human sign.

Abruptly Av broke off his narrative. Belinda was not looking well. Bent forward, face flushed, she stared blankly at the floor, her palms pressed against the sides of her neck.

"Go on," she said hoarsely. "It is no less the truth if I do not hear it. Go on."

Hesitant at first, Av complied. "I counted six skulls, five adult and one child. There were two killkenny skulls as well."

"The bodies would have drawn both the killkennies and the beetles," Tola said authoritatively.

"Yes. The 'kennies probably knocked down the ladder, the way they fight over a carcass. The ones

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that were trapped inside were eaten by the beetles. And then the beetles ate each other."

Kenman broke in. "The Ellijay were twenty, at least. What about the others? Were they in the cupa that collapsed?"

"No," Av said, still watching Belinda with concern. "It was a living place — bowls, roughweave, a woodpipe—"

All knew that the objects would carry the mark of their making. "Ellijay?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps a daughter family," Belinda said hopefully. "Did you keep looking for the lake?"

"Yes — in vain. I was where the lake was. The lake is gone. The downstream wall is broken."

Belinda's demeanor brightened. "That must be why. The others must have left, moved to some better homehill."

"I do not think so, Belinda. I think it is that no one troubled to find a resting place for the last few to die, that they were too weak to do more than drag them to the other cupa and push them in. I don't know what killed them, they were so scattered by the 'kennies and picked so clean by the beetles. But I wanted to know before I returned here if it had touched me as well."

"So you went on, as far as the Cantona."

He nodded. "If I were dying, I thought I should at least see new faces and new places before surrendering."

"This is a new death, then that saps a family's traditions first," Elul said, his tone a criticism.

"For every star, there is a way to die," Ledell said. "This is not a new death but an old one. Do you not remember the silence? Even the Lonega have lost family to it. They crawl inside themselves, insensate to pain, oblivious to hunger, until their song ends. It is said they have asked the question 'Why not die?' and found no answer."

Belinda stood, hugging herself, and faced Av. "No!" she said fiercely. "That is *not* what happened." With the light, quick steps of a hunter's quarry forewarned, she ascended the ladder and was gone.

"In the time of dark, the water spirit fed us," Ledell said, and all turned to look at him. "I will say that it has taken the Ellijay in payment."

There was a stunned silence. "You think the end of time is coming, Ledell?" Kenman said at last.

"Our mothers' mothers' mothers lived in darkness on the gifts of the water spheres. Then the sky sphere brought a greater gift, sweeping away the darkness. We grew healthy in the light. But we forgot our debt to the water." Then he shrugged, as though discounting his own words. "I am the keeper of the past, nothing more. Tomorrow is always a surprise."

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"Come to the meadow with me."

Kenman looked at Belinda with surprise. "They are gathering to hear Av's story—"

"They do not need us for that."

"There are too many clouds for watching."

She crossed her arms and cocked her head. "Why do you resist me?"

"Perhaps because I have no answers to your questions. For such things you are better served by Denis, or Av himself."

"And what questions are those?"

"The ones that steal the smile from you."

The smile appeared, tender. "And if I prefer you, despite your ignorance?"

Kenman bobbed his head submissively. "I will go and tell them not to wait on us."

With hands clasped, they walked to the stream and crossed to the meadow beyond, then settled in a familiar spot.

"Does is not seem as though our family is the only strong family left in the hills?" she asked.

"Burdens fall unequally."

"Yet we all live better than our mothers did. There is more food, warmer days. Why should families fail in plenty when they thrived in scarcity?"

"Gifts also fall unequally."

"What do we have that the Ellijay did not?"

"A Twelvenames called Belinda," he said readily.

Annoyance crossed her face. "Is it not clear to you that I too, will die? If not this winter, then the next, or the next. Where is the breeder who has seen forty summers?"

"You will. Surely life will grant that to a Twelvenames."

"You have made too much of me," she said, annoyance turning to anger.

"You have the magic."

She pushed his solicitous touch away angrily. "Oh, yes. Belinda Twelvenames has the magic. Everyone believes it. But how much of the magic is in the believing and how much of it is in me?"

"I don't understand why you doubt—"

She threw her hands up in a gesture of frustration. "What honor is there for a Twelvenames that has outlived half her brood? Perhaps I will be further honored, and see them all dead."

"It pains me to see you unhappy—"

"It pains me that you do not understand," she said curtly, grasping his hands tightly. "What is the purpose if death always follows life? Why sing the songs? Why keep the tales? If I am the meaning, then there is no meaning, for I know none. If I am the heart, then we are empty, for I am empty. If I am the reason we live, then why not die now, for I surely will."

"I said I would have no answers," he said helplessly.

"Which I forgive. But you fear the

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questions, which I do not," she said with contempt.

Fat raindrops began to pelt them, kicking up tiny puffs of dust and striking the leaves with a slapping sound. A seamless rumble of thunder echoed among the hills. Unexpectedly, Belinda laughed.

"The sky rebukes me for my angst," she said. "Go back home. I wish to bathe myself in the new water and absorb its spirit." She undid the side ties of her blouse and lifted it over her head, then removed her hip cloak. "Go, good husband," she said as she began the dance. "In the morning I will be well again."

"Damn the light!" Andor exclaimed, peering at the faint marks cut in the flat surface of the split stick he held in his hand.

Rain had been falling every night for a week. The deluge had left the Lonega sodden and surly, prolonging and deepening the distressing sense of custom violated that came with learning the Ellijay had died unremembered.

Cut off from his own watching by the sheets of gray clouds, Andor absorbed himself in the records Av had brought back from the Gaddis and the Cantona. The Gaddis records were easily understood, since Polton, the Gaddis' senior watcher, used the marking system common to all the hill families.

But Polton's observations filled few of the gaps in Andor's own, since it was rare for two families so close together not to suffer the same weather. Only those observations that Polton himself had got from families still farther north were of any use.

Andor was much more interested in the Cantona records, since their homehill was more remote and he had no recent observations from that part of the world. But the marking system was unfamiliar and Av's explanations confusing: \ / was the observer's mark, / a wanderer. What, then, Andor demanded, did

or

mean? Av did not know.

Patiently, with the help of his own records, Andor puzzled out the remainder. There were marks for the rising and setting of the moon, for night's arrows, and, it seemed, for the nightfire itself — though the disagreements between their sightings and his own raised doubts in his mind about the skills of their watchers.

Veracity aside, the Cantona records were elegantly concise and, despite their brevity, contained most of what Andor wanted to know. But by the time he recognized that, Andor was too aggrieved with the Cantona to admire their invention.

On the eighth day after Av's return, the air changed and the low clouds broke apart to reveal a high, shimmering blue sky. Andor celebrat-

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ed by setting off for the high observatory, which lay in a mountain gap a tiring two-hour climb to the west. In truth, it was a trip better left to the younger watchers.

But the high observatory was special. A great circle of stick markers preserved the positions of dayrise and dayset, nightrise and nightset as seen from the circle's center during earlier watchings. Some of the placements had been made by Andor's predecessor Nirel as long as a hundred summers ago. Though his legs always regretted his mind's enthusiasm, it was by far his favorite place for watching. From there the whole bowl of heaven and the whole disk of Earth seemed on display for his inspection.

As the reddened face of the sun touched the far horizon, Andor held the sighting rod vertically and noted how its shadow fell across the circle. It was three phases to the north-sun day, the end of the sun's summer march north along the horizon. Soon it would begin its retreat, foretelling the short-day cold to come.

Andor remained at the high observatory until distant clouds obscured the yellow wanderer, precluding his observing at what point it also slid down beyond the horizon. By that time the cool breezes that blew almost steadily across the observatory had brought the chill-ache to Andor's bones, and he gathered up his things to go. His last duty was to sing the song of the wanderers, which he did in a high, reedy voice. Then he headed back down the mountain to the homehill.

He was nearly there when his eye caught the glint of a brilliant light climbing the curve of the night from the north: the nightfire. His mind recorded the sighting automatically, registering mild surprise since it had been only fourteen days since the last apparition. Then he turned his face fully toward it, and what he saw caused his muscles to fail him, dropping him to his knees, the sighting stick falling from his numb hand. He knelt, his hands clapped over his mouth, and beheld a wonder.

For racing toward the zenith were *two* nightfires.

Andor was frozen for a moment, then leaped to his feet and began to run, his way lit by the lights above. Branches whipped his face and arms, and deadwood strained to trip him. *They must see or they will not believe,* he thought, heart pounding — *They must know* — and raced on recklessly. But as he neared the homehill, a foot slipped sideways and he went down heavily, pain shooting through his ankle. He lay there helpless, mortified by his failure, then forgave himself as he heard the cry of a Lonega guardian:

"By the mother of the light! By the light herself! Belinda! Kenman! Kirsta! Arise! Come quickly! The nightfire! By the Twelvenames, the nightfire has twinned!"

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"Ask, ask, ask, so I can parade my ignorance," Andor moaned, the blanket slipping off his shoulders as he threw his arms wide. The watcher was still agitated, though enough time had passed to herd back to bed the young ones awakened by the guardian's cries, and to wrap Andor's swelling ankle with *dur*-soaked roughweave.

"Calm yourself, Andor," Belinda said. "I do not expect perfect knowledge from you."

"But I am senior watcher. I should know the meaning—"

"Enough! Andor, what brings the nightfire?"

The watcher averted his eyes. "The nightfire owns its own spirit, and moves as it chooses."

"Spare me well-worn sayings that are empty of meaning," Belinda reproached. "What do you hold the nightfire to be? Is it kin to the sun, or to the wanderers, or to the moon?"

Taking a clay bowl in hand, Andor dragged himself across the dirt circle and crouched in front of an anthill. "They are as we are," he said, pointing. "They live in the earth, in a homehill, and take their life from the earth." Then Andor inverted the bowl and set it upside down over the anthill. "This is as the sky is, a great, smooth bowl of blue rock over us. The spirits of the sky crawl across its face and give us their light. They are all kin to each other."

"You do not remember, then, the story of the founding?" Ledell asked indignantly. "How the nightfire carried the spark to the sun and ended the time of dark?"

Elul caught the note of alarm. "If this new nightfire should twin the sun, would we not burn?"

Ledell's expression was grave. "We would."

"I will not have this muddied by stories of times that no one here witnessed," Belinda said sharply.

"You question my keeping?" Ledell was too astonished to be insulted.

"Your keeping is splendid," she replied. "But you forget that I have heard the stories others tell of me, and know that what is kept is not always what is true." She turned back to Andor. "You have not answered my question. What is the nightfire? Is it flame, spirit, substance?"

Andor grunted his unhappiness. "How am I to know these things?"

"Have you never considered such a question?"

"No. It is the nightfire. Why should it be anything else? How could I attempt to take its measure? Av — were you not with the Adako when the nightfire came last summer?"

"I was."

"And how far is that?"

Av considered a moment. "A run of twelve days."

"And did not the nightfire still rise beyond the farthest tree or mountain? Was it any larger, any brighter?"

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"No."

Andor turned an apologetic look on Belinda. "Do you see? It is so far away that twelve days' run brings it no closer. And yet if it is so far away, it must own a terrible flame. The nightfire is not part of the land. It is over us, beyond us. It is not meant that we should know its substance, that it burns without being consumed. It is not meant that we should know what moves it, that it chooses a path unique in the sky. It is not meant that we should know its purpose, that it alone comes without pattern or plan. There is a great space set between us, and we may not cross."

"Is there truly no rhythm to its apparitions?"

Andor shook his head vigorously. "No watcher has found one, and many have searched. As recently as Nirel's time, the nightfire went two years without appearing, yet this spring there were two apparitions in three nights."

"How often has it come this year?"

"I do not know."

That drew a quizzical look from Belinda, and Andor hastened to explain. "Our family has recorded five sightings before tonight. But there were many clouded nights this winter, and our knowledge could well be incomplete."

"What about the records I brought you?" Av asked.

"The Gaddis saw as we did. The Cantona claim five more sightings, but I cannot believe it."

Belinda's eyes narrowed. "Why not?"

"There has never been such a number of apparitions."

"What was the count last year?"

"Eight — the most ever recorded."

"And the year before?"

"Five."

Belinda stood and walked to the far side of the sky circle, craning her head to look up. The clawed beetle was overhead, the tiny skylights that outlined its carapace sharp against the inky night. "How can you say there is no pattern? Where when I was young it came once each year, now it comes once each month. What will happen when it comes once each night?"

Ledell followed her halfway across the circle. "The Seneca say that in times to come, the nightfire will awaken the cold light of the moon and drive away the last of the dark. *That* is what is coming. There will be no more death, and no more need of remembrance. We will all live forever in the light." His voice changed from a warning hiss to a patronizing sneer. "But forgive me — you do not believe the stories of an old keeper," he said, and stalked off in high dudgeon toward his cupa before she could reply.

"Andor?" she called across the circle. "Is this your belief as well?"

Andor struggled to his feet with an assist from Kenman. "Mother Belinda, I would gladly give you the

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answer you desire," he said unhappily. "But I am still as I was an hour ago. I do not have an answer, for you or for myself."

Belinda frowned crossly. "I do not see why we could not travel to where the sky meets the earth and climb it, as the ants climb the inside of the clay bowl. Then we could behold the sky spirits as we behold each other, and know them."

Andor shook his head, his expression wistful. "I asked the same question of Nirel when I was younger, who had asked it of his teacher in turn. The received wisdom is that no runner could go to where the sky meets the earth, because it lies a life's journey away beyond a great lake."

"To all points? The north, the south—"

"This is more than legend. I have not seen the lake-of-the-horizon, nor have any of our living runners. But Weneta did, and betimes we hear of it from other families. I am afraid we are forever in the lesser world and the skyfires forever in the greater."

Belinda sighed and gathered her nightcloak about her. "If true, it is a great pity." She glanced at each of her husbands in turn. "Come, Kern," she said, deciding. "I grow chill."

It was Belinda's habit to go walking in late morning. The long walks gave her the exercise she desperately needed to fight off the sedentary, pampered life the family tried to force on her. Her sojourns likewise took the edge off her hunger before the high-sun meal, saving her from the round-bodied fullness that was common to seniors beyond blood-end.

Sometimes Kenman, one of the children, or, when killkennies were known to be about, a guardian accompanied her. More often she walked alone, and relished the privacy and the temporary sense of privatism it allowed. On her purposeless sojourns, she was just Belinda, not a Twelvenames, not senior of the Lonega, and beholden to no one.

But there were times when she could not free herself, could not shed her concerns as though they were clothes left behind in the dust of the sky circle. As the days before the north-sun day slipped away in the easy rhythms of a practiced life, Ledell was such a concern. Sleep had not improved the keeper's disposition, nor had he forgotten the perceived affront.

In fact, he made an ongoing issue of it, telling his version of the Seneca endtime tale in his persuasive way to audiences of any size, always mentioning in a manner calculated to stir indignation that the senior had scoffed at the wisdom of the Seneca (and, by implication, of Ledell himself). All this came to Belinda secondhand, for Ledell avoided Belinda and her husbands when he could and was surly to them when he could not.

There was no mystery in any of

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this. Like most keepers of any skill, Ledell was suffused with male ego. It was what made them good keepers: they thirsted for the high seat, the center circle, and the attention their tales could command. It was also the reason so few keepers were taken as husbands, for rare was the breeder that would stand for such nonsense once the tale was over and the spell broken.

Belinda knew what Ledell wanted, what would end the backstabbing campaign. Ledell expected an apology, one at least as public as his humiliation. More than one earnest family member had taken it on himself to come to her, tell her of Ledell's unhappiness, and gently suggest how she might end it.

But she balked at giving him what he wanted, as much because of the campaign he was waging as because she in fact thought the Seneca tale to be foolishness. It was not in harmony with the watchers' knowledge of the sky, or with her own instinctive beliefs. Families knew beginnings and endtimes, but surely the world did not. She did not even quite believe there had been a time of dark, but if there had been, she was sure it had not been the beginning of anything but legends.

Her thoughts were interrupted when someone called her name. She stopped and turned, looking back through the trees the way she had come. It was Alice-Tonda-Ken, barefoot and breathless.

"Have you come all this way looking for me?"

Alice-Tonda-Ken nodded vigorously, not yet having caught her wind.

"You have walked enough, then, I think," Belinda said. She led the pregnant girl to a newly fallen log (one not yet taken over by armored scavengers).

When Alice-Tonda-Ken had arranged herself on the log, Belinda crouched on the ground facing her. "Why did you follow?"

"You promised there would be talk, and there hasn't been. Or did I miss it, and the decision is made?"

"About what, child?"

"What are you going to do about the Gaddis?"

There is rebellion in that question, young breeder, Belinda thought. *But you at least come to me alone with it.* Shrugging, she said aloud: "What is there that can be done?"

"Kenman said it the day Av returned. We can send them some of our substance."

Belinda made a gesture of demurral. "We would only weaken ourselves without strengthing the Gaddis. Then both families might go the way of the Ellijay. I plan no family gift." She cocked her head, and her eyes bored into the girl's. "What is your concern with it? You have no broodkin among the Gaddis."

Alice-Tonda-Ken looked suddenly uncomfortable, as if realizing her mo-

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tives had been plumbed. She opted for directness. "There are those who would go if you gave them the chance."

"Oh?" Belinda said as though it were a surprise.

"Perhaps some of us love the Gaddis more than you do."

"I love none better than the Lonega. That is my flaw," Belinda said, gently asserting herself by rising to her feet. "You are one who would be willing to go?"

"I would."

"And your two husbands?"

"They would go with me."

It is Maryn all over again. "Any good husband would," Belinda said in a neutral tone. "Alice-Tonda-Ken, are you so unhappy with us?"

Alice-Tonda-Ken squirmed. "My song is not heard clearly here," she said finally. "The family hears your song, and the song of Kirsta Sixnames, and—" She stopped. "You will take me wrong."

"No, I understand quite well," Belinda said. "With the Lonega you stand third among our breeders. But among the Gaddis you would stand higher, and your song might be heard very clearly indeed. If your new child is healthy, you could displace Sylva-Mark-Juniper as senior of the Gaddis."

Alice-Tonda-Ken nodded eagerly, taking understanding for agreement. "Ledell said—" She stopped short, realizing her mistake, as Belinda's features twisted into a chilly grimace.

"And does Ledell wish to go, too? Perhaps to see that the Gaddis hear the stories of the time of dark and become strong in the hearing?"

The young girl nodded sullenly.

I should let them go, Belinda realized. *They could weaken us more by staying than by leaving, if they cannot accept their lot.* But she could not bring herself to acquiesce to their demand.

"You are too unseasoned to be a senior," she said coldly. "If you understood what it means to be senior, you would know that there is something wrong in wanting it too much."

"I will never become 'seasoned' here," she said angrily. "I might still be a child for all that breeding has brought me."

Belinda clucked disapprovingly. "Those are Ledell's thoughts, which he has put into you for his own purposes. A senior must know not to listen too much to men. That is in Ledell's tales, too, but he does not like to tell it," she said, answering anger with patience. "You will grow here, if you will let yourself. The strength of a family comes not from numbers alone but when each member knows and accepts his role. When you understand that, then you will be ready to help the Gaddis."

The fire of rebellion in Alice-Tonda-Ken's eyes, flickering feebly by that time, died. "Yes, Belinda."

Belinda held out her hands and helped the breeder to stand. "Let's

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walk back to the homehill together," she said, her tone deliberately light and friendly. But her heart was heavy, with a new concern to possess it. Ledell would no doubt try again, and Alice — self-centered, impatient Alice — would no doubt take courage from his blandishments and offer new challenge.

Fighting without and within, forgetting the songs and neglecting the crafts, even quietly giving up life — what is happening to the families of the Georgias?

By the time they reached the homehill, Belinda had decided to grant Ledell a concession after all. Not an apology, but a gesture that could be taken as one if Ledell was so inclined — and would be taken as one by the rest of the family. She called for a circlefire that night.

The response to her call was as always, though perhaps a degree more intense, a sign she had been neglecting the emotional life of the family. The children were openly excited, because a circlefire meant that they would be allowed to be up and about after dayset. The adults went about their chores with a lighter step, remembering their favorite stories and songs and lobbying for them to be a part of that night's celebration.

Ledell himself grumbled that he could not be expected to be at his best on such short notice, and asked snidely if Belinda wanted to approve each story before he told it. But he did not refuse to take part. Just as Belinda had anticipated, the lure of the audience was strong enough to make him cast aside his disaffected posture.

When the dayset meal was finished, runners and providers pitched together to build the circlefire in the sky circle: a tinder bed and a great mound of dry treewood too small and fast-burning for cooking.

When the sky overhead had darkened to a velvet black, the call went up from Kenman, and the family came to the sky circle — all save Belinda. They filled all the sittingstones but one, the largest and northmost in the circle, and sat there in the darkness in silence, hands linked one to the next, child to mother, husband to breeder, guardian to maker to runner to watcher.

Then from the north they heard music, a woman's clear voice giving life to the mournful song of dark. it was a song never heard except at a circlefire, and its melody evoked the loss of friends and children, a cold transcending that of winter's short-day nights, the terror of living a life in dark at the mercy of its unknowable powers.

They heard the singer, but they did not see her, until Belinda pulled the shroud from the ceremonial torch she carried. She held it high, its feeble light marking her passage as she came to them, entered the circle by

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stepping across her own sittingstone, and touched the flame to the edge of the woodpile.

She stepped back as the needlewood spat and crackled, and began to sing the song of the sun. The family joined her, even the youngest, for it was the song mothers sang to children cradled in their arms. The circlefire blazed high and filled the clearing with dancing light. At a gesture from Belinda, the family raised their joined hands high.

"We are the family Lonega, bound by blood and fire to each other and to life," she cried. "Out of dark we have come and into dark we will go. But today we live well in the light, sharing the gifts of the earth with each other." She moved to her place in the circle and grasped the upraised hands of those to either side of her, completing the circle. "The fire is with us. The magic is in us. May both remember the Lonega forever!"

She lowered her arms to her sides with a sudden motion, and a happy cheer went up from the family. As she settled on her sittingstone, Ledell rose and came before her.

"Belinda Twelvenames, mother of Kirsta and Garivan, mother of Alix and Bria, mother of Erik and Erin, mother of Dette and Madee, mother of David and Ajit and Cherim, senior to the Lonega and beloved of the Georgias. The right of first request is yours."

Belinda smiled inwardly. The formal address was Ledell's apology, as the circlefire was hers. She met his eyes and saw the gesture as honest. "Keeper's choice," she said, with a little nod.

His eyebrows flicked upward in surprise. Then he rose from his crouch and turned toward the fire. "Belinda Twelvenames has granted me keeper's choice. I thank her, and give the choice in turn to—" He took a comical leaping step and came down in front of Belinda's youngest daughter. "Bria."

The child tittered. "Tell us how the killkenny lost its fur."

Ledell bounced to his feet. "Why, it wasn't just fur! It was a golden cloak, as yellow and soft as Alix's hair. And long — as long as your hand, so it blew in the wind and the little killkennies could hide in it when danger came—"

Ledell recounted that and two other short, amusing etiologies. His seductive voice could be heard clearly over the crack of the exploding firegrass tinder and the crackle of the burning treewood fuel.

Then he stepped aside to let young Kip try his hand at an adventure. The keeper coaxed a song from sad-faced Tania and, with Cherim as the quarry, played out an amusing ill-starred hunt by a maledict provider. It was one of Ledell's best performances, even before he turned serious and called for silence.

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"I wish to tell of the founding of the Lonega," he said solemnly, "of First Mother Christiana and her flight across the ice at the time of the first dayrise."

Ah, you could not resist, Belinda thought. But at least it is our darktime tale. The rest of the family settled in comfortably, for, unlike some of Ledell's keepings, Christiana's story called for rapt attention rather than participation.

"Before Eloai, before Chaldan, before Jennif, before Deborah, before grass grew on the homehill of the Lonega and game flourished in our forests, the world was without light," Ledell began in his most somber voice. "The dark lasted a time without measure, and the world was cold. There was no sun to warm the day, no dayrise, no dayset. There was no moon to protect the night, no nightrise, no nightset. There were no stars to mark the seasons."

As he continued, Ledell began to walk around the circlefire with slow, deliberate steps. "The mountains, the lakes, the southlands lay cloaked in shadow and gloom. Over all spread a blanket of snow and ice. No tree bore leaves, no bush bore fruit, no flower bore blooms. The darkdeath was everywhere — no family was untouched by it."

He paused for effect. "And into this world was born a breeder named Christiana.

"Though the land was without life, under the ice the deep lakes harbored many kinds of fish: wily fish, bitter fish, bony fish, and dinner fish," he recounted, taking a lighter tone. "The family of Christiana lived on the ice and took their meals from the lake through holes they cut in the ice. When they had eaten all the dinner fish one hole held, they would take down their homes and bundle their possessions and make another hole in another place. They were always cold, and they were always moving. But in a world full of death, they had found a way to life. And Christiana sucked strongly at her mother's breast and grew.

"But the world was changing," he said, his voice dropping to a whisper. "In the time Christiana reached first blood, warm winds would blow without warning, puddling the skin of the ice and making its body shift and rumble. The clouds overhead swirled about as though stirred from above.

"And in the time Christiana was to marry, the first spark of light entered the world: a tiny shimmering point of fire that appeared on the northern horizon and slowly rose into the sky. It gave no warmth, but the light was beautiful, and Christiana's family wept with joy for the sight of it.

"The spark climbed higher, higher," he said with a slow, sweeping wave of one hand, "The black cloud that had hung over the land began to lift, growing smaller, smaller, until both met at the highest part of the sky.

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"And when the nightfire touched the cloud, the cloud exploded into binding light. The larger part became the sun, and the smaller part became the moon.

"And the light from them both healed the world.

"When the light touched the land, the snows began to melt, and the bowed limb of trees to straighten and green. The light drove the darkdeath into the shadows, where it still hides, waiting for when the sun and moon are absent and the sky grows dark once more.

"Since they were closer to the sun, the mountains to the north were the first land so transformed. From them the nightfire had come, and to them it gave life. Christiana saw the life there and knew that it was time to leave the lake, that the hills would be a better home for her children and herself. And so she took the hand of the young fisher she had chosen for her husband, and together they walked off the ice and climbed into the hills.

"They had barely reached the first ridge when the earth shook, and the air was filled with a roaring sound. When Christiana looked back, she saw the surface of the lake in turmoil, the ice shattering, and the lake taking back the food it had given up—"

There were loud squeals from several young ones on the far side of the circle, and Ledell glared at them crossly for the interruption. Belinda added her chiding look, and with a nudge dispatched Alix-Ellet to quiet the noisemakers.

But before she could move, Elul, who was seated across the circle near the children, jumped up and pointed a trembling finger at the northern sky.

"Andor!" he cried. "Andor, explain!" The harsh circlefire light showed each line of his fear-contorted face.

Heads began to turn, and alarmed adults came to their feet in a wave that spread in both directions from Elul. The noises of the youngest children changed from gleeful cries to frightened crying as they sensed their parents' alarm.

"Be silent!" Ledell raged, his back to the north, still taking the interruption personally.

But now even those on the north side of the circle could see what Elul still pointed at, could see that the upturned awestruck faces were lit not by the circlefire but from above. Now Belinda realized that not all the crackling came from the circlefire, not all the squealing from the children, but that both had been joined by a harrowing cry from above.

The apparition was larger than sun and moon combined, and burned with colors never seen in the sky: a ghostly blue, a harsh scarlet, a hot green. The colors streaked the flickering trail it left as it flashed through the sky.

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Belinda found Andor at her elbow. "Could it be a night's arrow?" she whispered.

"No, Belinda," he answered in a strangled voice. "Mark its speed. Look at it grow larger. Listen to its roar. This is a great spirit, not a lesser one."

"I feel its nearness," she said with a shiver.

The apparition crossed the zenith, moving ever more slowly, the thunderlike rumble of its passing increasing. None took their eye from it as its multicolored trail grew thin and then vanished. The apparition itself underwent a metamorphosis, giving up its flaming halo for the cold glitter of broken fireglass.

"The uncrossable void is crossed," breathed Belinda. "It is the nightfire. The nightfire falls to earth."

"No, Belinda. It is an illusion," Andor said, shaking his head vigorously.

"Illusion or no, mark its fall well, Andor," Belinda said firmly. "For I will expect your help when I go to find it."

The resistance began the moment Belinda and her husbands descended into the privacy of their cupa.

"Belinda, will you hear an appeal?" asked Kenman.

"I will not."

"This journey cannot end well for the Lonega," he said, presuming on his seniority by ignoring her reply. "We will be divided and weakened."

"I need only Andor and whatever of my husbands choose to come with us."

"I will go," Av said quickly. "We know too little of the runs leading south."

"I will go as well," Kern quietly concurred.

"Spare me your echo, Denis," Kenman said harshly, holding his hand up in a plea for surcease. "How can any of us refuse and still call himself Belinda's husband?"

"I am a breeder and a Twelvenames. I go where I choose," she said curtly.

"That right is yours," Kenman said pleadingly. "But your wisdom has been to put the family first. That is what has made us strong."

"All the more reason that I should now put myself first, if that were all that figured. But it is not. As you have told me yourself, you are no watcher. You do not understand the importance."

"The family is of first importance, always."

Belinda sighed. "If you did not think so, you would not be the fine guardian you are. But that is also why guardians should never rule the family. It is not in them to suffer change or weigh uncertainty."

"If you won't consider the family, then think of yourself. You will be at risk every moment you are gone."

"A Twelvenames has friends every-

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where," Av protested. "Who would dare harm her, or even wish to?"

"Stop," Belinda said sharply, preempting an angry response from Kenman. "I will not have my husbands arguing on this. Nor questioning me. Tomorrow I will leave with Andor in search of the resting place of the nightfire. Such of you as are willing to do so in good spirit may come with us. There is nothing more to be said."

Then she retreated to her bedding in a manner that made clear none were welcome to follow.

Preparations for the expedition consumed much of the morning. There were seed pouches to fill, snare ropes to coil, guardsticks to sharpen, *dur* and burnweed leaves to gather. Dward directed his providers to dig up the winter store of dried meat from the floor of the greater cupa and remove half for the use of the travelers.

In the midst of the bustle, Kirsta Sixnames suddenly appeared at Belinda's elbow. "Belinda—"

"Kirsta, I have been looking for you. In my absence, you must serve as senior—"

"Belinda, I wish to come with you."

Belinda masked her surprise. "Then come. You have the right."

"I prefer your approval and consent."

"Then I require your reasons."

Kirsta's eyes misted and she looked away. "I barely know them myself."

"You have never wished to head the family," Belinda stated in a softer tone.

"No."

"It has been enough for you to see your children grow to take husbands and crafts."

"Yes." Tears began to stream from her eyes, and she threw herself into Belinda's embrace. "Belinda, I am drying up. I near the blood-end. Before Sonda I was six summers between children, and I know that when Sonda leaves my breast there will be no more to follow her."

Belinda stroked her daughter's hair comfortingly. "I know," she whispered. "I know. It is the breeder's curse. There are times I think that to live with the emptiness brings more pain than to die of the dark."

"What Av said — about the Ellijay," Kirsta sobbed into Belinda's shoulder. "I find myself also asking, Why not die? Mother, I do not want to end like the Ellijay. But I fear that if I do not do something, find some answer, the silence will take me as well."

"I understand," she said. "I understand all too well. You are welcome to join us. In fact, I will relish your presence, as it will relieve the endless empty babble of the men."

"It will leave Alice-Tonda-Ken as senior-in-trust," Kirsta said timidly, pulling away.

"I considered that before I spoke. It will be good for her. She will learn

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either to fly or to be happy on the ground. And the firsts of the crafts will be here to see that she does not fall too hard. Or you bring Elul and Piter?"

"No. Not even Sonda. Alix-Ellet is in milk and will care for her. I would like to know what it is like to live without them."

Belinda nodded. "Perhaps you will find that you were not so empty as it seemed. Go, then, and make yourself ready."

By the highsun all preparations were complete, and the seven travelers gathered at the sky circle before departing. Only then did the family realize that Kirsta's preparations were not for her mother but herself.

"Belinda!" Alice-Tonda-Ken cried anxiously. "Does Kirsta go with you?"

"She does."

"I will have my child before you return. Who will attend me?"

"There is Alix-Ellet, and Kim-Averic, and Tania—"

"Tania's touch will make me barren," Alice protested with careless cruelty. "I have a right to have the senior present for the birthing."

"The senior will be present. You are to be senior-in-trust until we return—"

The news did not placate her. "You have always despised me because I am not your child," Alice said angrily, her voice rising to a screech. "You do this to keep me here, away from the Gaddis. You would be happy if I bore a cull, to ensure that I stay here where you can—"

Ledell suddenly stepped between Alice and Belinda. His back was to the senior, so that she could not see his expression. Nor could she hear his words, though she caught the intensity with which they were delivered. When he stepped aside, Alice spoke again, this time with a chastened civility.

"You will remember that Kip's birth taxed me, and the memory of it has made me afraid," she said, ending the awkward moment. "I regret my words and ask that they be not-spoken."

"They are not-spoken," said Belinda, silently grateful she had mended relations with the keeper. "I leave the Lonega in your hands, Alice-Tonda-Ken. Do well by them."

Alice answered with the traditional traveler's blessing. "May you run forever downhill."

"Aye to that," Andor growled, to general laughter. "Has there been enough talk? My legs are getting no younger."

"Then take the first step, old one, and we'll be that much closer," Av said playfully, and led the way as the party turned its back to the homehill and headed south.

They kept a runner's day, dayrise to dayset, though in deference to Andor they did not try to keep a runner's

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pace. On the morning of the fourth day, they skirted the great Christiana Lake, thought to be the setting of the founding tale Ledell never got to tell. Even near the lake, there were no runs to speak of, and they picked their way across fields of snarlgrass and needlewood copses guided only by the navigational instincts of Andor and Av.

By that night they were in unfamiliar and apparently uninhabited terrain, on the fringe of the scalded lands. Here the snarlgrass was thicker and more vigorous than they had ever seen it, and yet the land seemed brown and barren. With the new moon in the day sky, the party spent that dark night restless and uneasy. A short time before dayrise, Kern piked a killkenny that, out of uncharacteristic bravery or desperation, was drawn by the smell of food into the light of their fire. From that point on, there was no sleep had at all.

The land became flatter with each day, until it was the nearby flora rather than distant hills that limited how far one could see. That was no advantage, since Andor had taken his sighting of the nightfire's fall on those hills. From that point they would be dependent on dead reckoning and whatever could be learned from whomever they encountered.

About once a day they encountered broad whiterock runs unlike any in the northern hills — arrow-straight and elevated, with a central trough dividing them in two. The ridge runs, as Av dubbed them, were clear enough for good traveling, but none would take them south. On the afternoon of the fifth day, as they were crossing yet another of the ridge runs, they were halted by a ringing challenge from the trees ahead.

"Far enough, *porci*. You trespass against the Forsyth."

Kenman moved to the point, his guardstick in the low-ready position at his hip. At the same time Av pulled Belinda back across the run to a less exposed position.

"This is the party of Belinda Twelvenames, senior of the Lonega," Kenman called ahead. "If you have a watcher, we ask to speak with him. If you do not, then we ask safe conduct to the south."

"What is a 'Twelvenames,' *porci,* and why should we grant it passage?" The voice seemed to be coming from the right.

"What is a 'Forsyth,' voice-that-cowers-in-trees, that it is so ignorant? The Twelvenames is our senior breeder, mother to eleven fine children, gifted with the magics of twinning and song."

There was a rustling in a tree off to the left, and two bare legs appeared dangling beneath a limb. A moment later the rest of the body appeared as the young Forsyth guardian dropped lightly to the ground.

"I have never heard of a breeder birthing eleven young," he said suspiciously.

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"Then take us to your homehill and we will share the story," Av replied readily.

The guardian hestitated, seemingly torn by conflicting impulses. "Come," he said suddenly, and set off at a trot without looking back to see if they followed.

At the Forsyth's camp — it could not be called a homehill, with lean-to homes and without a sky circle or any other mark of permanence — they were better welcomed. The family leader was a gray-bearded man named Duane, a novelty that discomfited Belinda and her husbands alike. For his part, Duane was slow to adjust to Belinda's precedence over her husbands, tended at first to address both his questions and answers to Kenman.

But beyond that, Duane seemed earnest, wise-eyed, and curious, and he called in from his watch the guardian who had best seen the nightfire fall, so that Andor could talk with him. Then they shared food with the Forsyth in what was almost a meeting of equals, since there were only eleven of the family in camp.

The capacity of the lean-tos suggested that few if any providers were away, and Belinda wondered to herself if the family was in as much trouble as its small numbers suggested. *I myself have bred as many children as there are Forsyth here tonight*, she thought at one point.

That fact was not lost on Duane, who after the meal pressed Belinda to tell of her children, first in a way that betokened skepticism, then with growing credulity and respect. Av made up for all the bragging Belinda herself declined to do, with the result that as dayset approached, Duane excused himself to confer with another of his family, then returned with a proposition.

"We have a new breeder two moons past first blood. You would honor us if the husbands of the Twelvenames would lie with her. We much need the touch of your good magic. In the past five summers, our family welcomed but one new child."

"And how many culls?"

"Two hands' and more."

Belinda nodded gravely, then smiled a laughing smile at the hopeful look on Kern's and Denis's faces. "With my blessing, my husbands."

The girl, Alinda by name, lay on her back in the spidergrass by the lean-tos and squirmed fetchingly. Before she rose again she had opened her thighs to all five of the Lonega men in turn, and the Forsyth had sung and clapped their way through their best songs of breeding.

Then Belinda herself brought the sweat-happy Alinda a cloak, and combed out the young breeder's hair while singing her own song of breeding. The Forsyth watched and listened in a respectful hush, their hearts full of gratitude for such an unexpected blessing. For the Lonega men, the

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song was an anthem of fond memories, for all but Andor had had it sung soft-voiced to them in the confines of the Twelvenames' bedding.

When she was done there was little talking, but it was a good silence, the silence of full hearts and reflective minds. And the mood and the memory of the song brought Lonega and Forsyth alike a peaceful night's sleep under a watchful full-eye moon.

Declining Duane's repeated invitations to stay and share another meal, another breeder, another night of communion, the Lonega left the Forsyth at dayrise, taking their first meal on the trial as was their pattern.

Av led them, followed by Denis and Kern, who were arguing the merits of the Forsyth breeder, as well as of their own performance with her. Trailing the party were Kenman and Kirsta. In between, Belinda walked with Andor, and asked what he had learned by questioning the youth who had seen the nightfire fall.

"He was eager for me to know he had not been frightened, so eager that I am sure his bowels were loosed by fear," Andor said amusedly. "Beyond that — he seemed to think that the nightfire was overhead when the colors vanished and it regained its former aspect. I do not trust that very much, so it is not so bad that I do not know what it would mean."

"Have they heard of others who saw it, or had any word from families still farther south?"

"it seems they do not use runners, nor much welcome them, as we saw. The nightfire was not cause for exception."

"I am amazed that they made so little of it."

"I am afraid we are not yet very near to its resting place. We are sure to encounter those who know of it before we come on it ourselves—"

Without warning, Kirsta cried out, stumbled, and dropped to her knees. As she doubled over, the others could see the rough wooden shaft protruding from her back. Strangely, the shout of dismay that followed came not from the Lonega but from well back on the trail.

Belinda started to move to Kirsta's side but Av grabbed her and pressed her flat to the ground instead, shielding her body with his own. From there she watched as Kenman whirled and ran back down the trail, gripping his guardstick in the two-handed attack position. She saw a second arrow whip past him and bury itself in the brush. Kenman did not flinch or hestitate, and a moment later Belinda saw his target: the gray-bearded Duane, standing in the trail less than a hundred strides away and reaching to notch yet another arrow.

Perhaps the Forsyth leader, accustomed to fighting with coward's weapons, expected Kenman to halt his charge once the next arrow was ready. Perhaps Duane realized the charge

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was simply too fast, too furious for a mere arrow to halt. For whatever reason, he never gave the arrow flight. At the last moment, he turned the bow sideways as if to use it to fend off a thrust to the body.

But the thrust never came. Keeping his wide-spaced two-handed grip, Kenman swung the point of his guardstick to one side and swept it back in a short, slashing arc that intersected Duane's throat. Even a hundred strides away, Belinda saw the blood spurt, saw the ragged gash that meant a quick and quiet death.

Abruptly, crying "Andor!" Av leaped to his feet and left her. Only then did Belinda realize that the battle was all around her as well. Kern was standing over a fallen body. Denis was still wrestling with an ambusher, with Kenman hastening back to aid him. Andor was down, crawling and making pitiful sounds, his assailant stumbling after him with knife in hand — that was where Av was headed.

The Forsyth heard him coming and looked back over his shoulder, and Belinda saw that it was the young guardian who had stopped them the previous afternoon. He saw her as well, and for a moment their eyes met, her gaze accusatory, his unreadable. Then he fled, leaping over Andor's supine form and disappearing through the brush, with Av and Denis pursuing closely.

Coming to her feet, Belinda brushed the dirt and detritus from her forearms and went to where Kirsta lay on her side. Her breaths were wet and raspy, and a bloody froth trailed from one corner of her mouth.

Belinda held her daughter's hand until the light died in Kirsta's eyes, then she walked back down the trail. Standing over the still form of Duane Forsyth, she met his openmouthed death stare unflinchingly. His head rested in the puddle of blood that had flowed from his own wounds.

You could have taken us while we slept, for we posted no guardian of our own. A decision made late and unwisely, she thought sadly. *Yet part of the blame is surely ours, for parading too proudly our riches before the poor—*

Av joined her, made a shapeless noise deep in his throat, and raised his guardstick as though to strike at the still form in vengeance. Belinda's hand shot out and grasped the stick, forfending the blow.

"No," she said simply.

"Why do you protect him? He struck down Kirsta," Av protested in hurt and anguish.

"The arrow was meant for Kenman."

Av gaped at her, taking a moment to digest her meaning. "he would have taken you and Kirsta, to breed for him?"

"His family was dying. He could do nothing else."

"You excuse him."

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She shook her head slowly. "No. I understand him. Come, let us see to Andor."

The Forsyth's shinestone knife had pierced the muscle of Andor's right thigh twice, once deeply, once not. Kenman had stanched the bleeding, But there was nothing to be done for the watcher's pain.

"He lives, but I am afraid we will have to carry him back to the home-hill as well," Kenman said as Belinda arrived.

"I could stay with him until the healing begins, while the rest return with Kirsta," Denis offered.

"Have you both volunteered to make my decisions for me?" Belinda snapped. "This changes nothing. We will continue on."

Kenman's eyes narrowed. "Kirsta must be remembered by her family. She must be taken back—"

"Do not presume to tell me what my daughter needs," Belinda snapped with sudden fury. She closed her eyes, caught her breath, and continued in a more controlled tone. "She came with us looking for something and she has not yet found it. She had a yearning to find place and purpose and found neither. I have right of first claim, and I take her search for my own." she glowered at them as if daring them to argue. "Kirsta would not have turned back, and I will not."

Kenman would not be headed. "You think no more of her than of those who killed her, and would leave both to litter the trail?"

"We will find her a good resting place," Av said quietly.

"I do not understand you," Kenman said, shaking his head in disgust.

Andor answered, his voice weak but his tone commanding. "We have paid for something that we do not yet have. If the price seems high, how much higher must it seem if we never receive what it has bought?"

Kenman threw his hands up and stalked away, and Belinda looked to Av. "When we have sung the song of remembrance, will you find her body a good resting place, where it will be devoured undisturbed by men such as these?"

Av nodded deeply.

"Then let us begin, so that we can leave this place and the memory of this morning may begin to fade."

In an hour they continued on, assured by Av that he would be able to follow their trail sign and catch them when his task with Kirsta's body was completed.

The main party, wounded in both body and spirit, made comparatively slow progress. Their speed was limited by Andor's crippling, their outlook soured by Kirsta's absence. Kenman brooded, saying little when addressed and nothing of his own volition. Andor used Denis and Kern as human crutches, yet still winced at

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each jolting step.

Absenting herself from the group, Belinda walked alone, alternately outdistancing the others and then stopping until they drew near again. She needed the time to weave an emotional shroud into which to place the kernel of pain she held inside. It was almost a tangible process, as she saw herself methodically walling off the emotion and moving it beyond reach. But unlike in the past, this time when she was done, something remained outside: guilt.

I gave you life, Kirsta, but could not give that life meaning, she thought. *I am responsible for your emptiness and for the hurt it brought you.*

Near dayset they spotted a tendril of smoke rising into the sky from among the trees ahead. Peremptorily dispatching Av to head toward the smoke, Kenman led them in a wide arc to the west to avoid the community the smoke might represent. Av was not long in rejoining them, since he had but a single question to ask: "Where did the nightfire fall?"

The family called themselves the Doerun, and the answer was a vague as always: south, far south. A runner had gone five days in search of it and returned having found nothing. The Doerun runner did bring back a report that the ice star, as it was called in that region, had fallen at the edge of the great lake-of-the-horizon.

"That's why he came back, it seems. They said we would find few people and fewer families the nearer we get to the lake, that it is a place of storms and sickness," Av reported.

"How far to the lake?" Kenman wanted to know.

"Twelve days."

Hearing that seemed to bring Kenman out of his funk. They would not be journeying on forever; the lake-of-the-horizon would stop them, and soon.

For a time Andor's wounds grew better, and the fourth day after the attack, he walked unaided for much of the morning. But the next day the deep slash was swollen and began to weep a cloudy fluid. Within a week the leg had begun to stink, and Andor to quietly admit of a loss of feeling in his foot and ankle. By then all knew that Andor had been touched by the darkdeath, and that at some point the journey would inevitably claim a second victim from among the travelers.

If all knew it, none gave voice to it. All took their example from Andor. The watcher could not hide the tight-lipped grimace he wore throughout the early days, but as the nerves died and the leg went numb, he began to show the good humor he had claimed from Kirsta.

"There, take the upwind side," he would invite Av or Denis as they helped him up. "Now if you could tell me how I could walk upwind of myself, I'd be grateful.

"Now that I can't feel it, I walk

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more lightly, don't you think?" he asked. "If my whole body went numb, I believe I would float like fluffseed."

In the dark when they had turned to bed, he would mumble aloud, "A blessing that the nose sleeps with the rest of me."

Though his jokes were frequently as lame as he was, they relieved the tension by telling the others he had accepted his state, and inviting them not to make his problems theirs. He underlined that along the trail, never flagging or complaining, never asking the others to stop for a rest, and always being the first to call for them to continue.

Nevertheless, when one of Av's side trips brought him on a passable blackrock run that promised to take them due south, they gave up the open country for it out of consideration for Andor. On the run's hard surface, the watcher could do for himself (at the price of some speed) with the aid of a pair of walking sticks.

"Couldn't stand to take your turn with me again, eh?" Andor gibed, shaking a finger at Av. But that night he confided to Belinda that he was grateful for the change, saying, "If you lean on too many shoulders, you can forget how to stand by yourself."

Near highsun the next day, they came on a small family living along the side of the run, a breeder with a single husband and two small children. But Belinda learned nothing from them, since they startled at Av's recognition call and then fled at the Lonega's approach.

At the end of the day, the dayset was spectacular, a broad band of bright red across the western horizon. Noting it, Andor warned the others, "We'll lose the good sky tomorrow."

True to Andor's prediction, that night during Denis's watch the air changed, becoming uncomfortably thick as the stars vanished behind a curtain of clouds. Shortly before Denis would have woken the others, there was a brief heavy rain shower that did the job for him. They stayed up to see the morning come without a dayrise, as a blanket of low, water-swollen clouds covered the sky from horizon to horizon.

Rain resumed falling before they had been on the run long enough to break sweat, and with the rain the wind from the east freshened. At first both rain and wind were constant but gentle. But with each step the Lonega took, the raindrops grew in size and the pitch of the wind rose —gusting, then ebbing, then gusting to a new peak. The caressing rain Belinda at first welcomed began to batter exposed skin, and the bursts of wind made them stagger and Andor fall. From heartbeat to heartbeat the sky grew darker, the changing canopy of clouds growing ever more turbulent, until it was hard to believe it was day at all.

Before long the unrelenting as-

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sault drove them off the run and into the nearest copse. But there was little comfort and less shelter as the wind pelted them with leaves and small branches stripped from the trees. The six huddled together at the base of one stalwart needlewood, turning their backs to the sky, joining hands in a tight circle with Andor at the center. Almost unconsciously, Belinda began to sing the song of the Lonega, and the others reflexively joined her, the familiar sound the only balm against the onslaught.

And still the fury of the winds rose, bending the treetops to astonishing angles, the percussion of snapping branches punctuating the gale. A great limb crashed to the ground near them, its central bole as thick as a man's thigh.

Then, in rapid succession, the clouds broke, the rain ceased, the winds died to the faintest breeze. The transformation was as complete as it was sudden. Above them was the high blue sky of a peaceful summer day; around them was the wreckage of a war. Though the direct rays of the sun could not reach them where they huddled, the air around them was dramatically warmer.

Belinda was the first to rise, brushing absently and ineffectually at the bits of wood and leaf in her sodden hair as she gazed up at the sky. "Has there ever been such a storm?" she breathed. "What a wonder!"

There was a fit of coughing behind her, and she turned back to see Andor doubled up, with Av and Kenman each supporting him by an arm.

"Yes, a fine storm, a fine storm to drown in," Andor croaked when the fit passed. "Especially breeders too foolish to keep their mouths closed when they look up." He tipped his head back in an openmouthed mockery of Belinda, then grinned crookedly to encourage them to laugh.

None did.

"Belinda, it is time to go home," Kenman said, his voice half-iron and half-sugar. "This can only end in us dying unremembered in a strange land."

From the apprehensive expression on Denis's face, it seemed he agreed. Av scowled in disapproval, while Kern merely looked on with stoic curiosity.

"Nonsense," Belinda said lightly. "We are wet and perhaps a bit shaken, but we are far from dead."

Kenman took a step toward her. "By craft and marriage, I am obliged to protect you. How can I protect you from such as this?" he asked, spreading his arms to take in the destruction. "How can I protect you when you take such risks?"

"If the challenge is too much for you, I will gladly free you from your craft and your marriage," she said with icy condescension. "But Kirsta and I are continuing on."

Kenman's jaw worked as he bit back the fury her response raised in him. The faces of the others, even

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Av's, showed varying degrees of shock, for, though both expulsion and unmarriage were prerogatives of the senior, the threatened punishment far exceeded the crime.

But the threat ended the discussion, and when Belinda turned her back and started off, they hesitated only briefly before falling in behind her. They picked their way back to the run to find the ditch beside it transformed into a thigh-deep swiftly moving stream. Wading through the muddy torrent, they found the run itself littered with broken branches and a plaster of wet leaves. The run shimmered with moisture returning to the sky.

Turning south, they found the way was nearly blocked by a shattered tree that had fallen across the blackrock at an angle. Denis was the first to look beyond the tree, and his face turned ashen. A vertical wall of black, boiling cloud filled the southern sky, and it took only a moment's observation to know it was bearing down on them.

The sight of the storm returning froze them for a hundred heartbeats. Then, with only a whimpering sound deep in his throat as forewarning, Denis broke and ran, not into the woods but back up the road, toward home. Within a dozen steps, he slipped on the slick surface and went sprawling, but he scrambled to his feet and regained his stride. Kenman called after him, but Denis gave no sign he heard, never hesitated, and never looked back.

"Let him go," Belinda shouted, and waded into the rushing water, heading for the trees. The others hastened to follow.

They were barely ensconced in their imperfect hideaway when the storm struck again in full fury, this time with the downpour driven by howling winds from the west. But this time Belinda knew what to expect, and was not afraid; in truth, she was excited in a frankly sexual way. She knew Kenman would have thought her mad if he knew her thoughts, but that did not change them:

Beautiful! she reveled silently as the rain lashed her face and the trees around them danced at the whim of the wind. *Your power is your splendor. And in your fury you are beautiful.*

By the next dayrise, the rain had eased to a drizzle, and the clouds, higher and lighter, gave the promise of breaking to open sky before dayset.

By that time it was also clear that the ordeal of the storm had drained much of Andor's remaining strength. The cough that had been shallow and intermittent had become deep and incessant, and at turns Andor shivered and shook uncontrollably. Though he insisted on trying, he could no longer walk on his own, as even the unin-

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jured leg buckled beneath him.

Watching him try, Kenman's face became a mask of determination. He pulled the roughweave wrap tight around the dwindling stock of dried meat, then set it aside. Quietly stripping off all but his genital pouch, he stood and announced, "I am going to find Denis."

"No," Belinda said, whirling to face him. "If he is alive, he is on his way home. If not, then he is already eaten."

"He came out of love and duty and did as well as could be expected of a maker," Kenman said. "You owe him."

"I owe him what I owe Kirsta —to see this through. If we are ready to travel, then we will all go, and we will go south."

Kenman pointed at Andor, again seated by the tree. "Is he ready to travel? He will have to be carried, like a corpse or a kill."

Tears of humiliation shone in Andor's eyes. "I will have to be carried whichever way we go," he said. "I would rather the view be of where we are going than where we have been."

"You are on a fool's quest, the both of you," Kenman upbraided. "What if you reach the lake-of-the-horizon and the nightfire is nowhere to be found? Will you insist on traveling the shore a hundred days in each direction to find it?"

"The Doerun said that it had fallen at the edge."

"The Doerun heard a story already three times retold. Did you not remind Ledell that what is kept is not always what is true?"

"But we saw it fall. And it has not been among the stars for sixteen days now," Andor protested.

"And is that so strange? Has it not been months, even tens of months, between apparitions? You are like the boy who climbs the highest tree to try to touch the sun. You do not understand your place."

"You insult us unfairly. The nightfire fell to earth," Belinda insisted.

"It did not fall because it could not, no more than the sun or moon could. It is a fire of heaven, and presently it will appear there again."

"That would prove nothing," Andor argued. "We saw the nightfire twin."

Kenman held his hand out before him with one finger upraised. "I have been thinking of that as well. I may twin my finger by looking at it *so*," he said, squinting cross-eyed. "But all the same, I have but one finger. What is seen and what is may differ."

"A guardian risks straining himself when he wrestles with reason," Andor said cuttingly.

"Reason has left you, Andor. If the nightfire fell to earth, would it not cause the ground to shake beyond imagining? Would it not set the sprawlgrass and needlewood burning such that no storm, not even such as we have come through, could quench

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it? But did the ground tremble? Is the world aflame? If not, then the night-fire did not fall. You search for nothing, for there is nothing to find."

"You are wrong," said a new voice.

Heads whipped up to see a slender runner wearing a brilliant red shawl and a glittering rope belt step from behind a tree and walk toward them. "I heard your voices and thought to see if you needed aid, so I listened. I did not understand everything that was said. But if you have come looking for that which left the trail of fire across the sky sixteen nights ago, it exists. I have seen it."

The runner's name was Jacobee, and he was not truly a runner, though he had the build of one. When a startled Kenman took his weapon up, Jacobee quickly shed his shawl to show he was unarmed. He was, he explained, a Floridian and a mystic. Neither term had meaning for the Lonega, and that was not the end of the strange language.

"We saw the *damikan* fall, and I was sent to measure its *palan*," Jacobee explained. "It rests on a shoal in the bay of shoals, west of the black marsh. From the ease with which I found it, I thought its *palan* strong, but I was wrong. I watched it from the shore for the prescribed period, and called the tenth-hour spells each morning, but it took all and gave nothing back."

"You could look on it without being blinded?" Andor demanded. "Did not the scorched ground sear your feet?"

Jacobee looked puzzled. "Did you not hear me? It is in the bay of shoals." He shuddered. "The dead ground is well west, and only a prime mystic would risk a *kelota* there. I have no wish to enter the spirit world early."

"But does the — *damikan* — not burn with a white flame?" Belinda demanded. "Does it not boil the waters and consume trees like fallen needles?"

Jacobee shook his head slowly. "I thought from the fall that it would have such a *palan,* but its heart is cold."

"Then how does it appear?"

The mystic touched fingertips to fingertips, trying to make the shape, then gave up the effort. "It stands twice the height of a man, with a white face complexly marked. I have never seen the like of it—"

While the interrogation was taking place, Kern had picked up and examined the shawl Jacobee had shrugged off. "What splendid making!" he exclaimed. "Belinda, look on this. The weave is so fine, the color so deep—"

"And rain rolls off as though off the face of a rock," Jacobee said, reclaiming it possessively. "It kept me well through the storm."

"Who is the maker?"

"I do not know. I found it among

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the trees near the *damikan*. This is but part of the whole. There was more, much more than I could carry or use, plenty to cloak all of you." He seemed suddenly nervous, and glanced repeatedly at the well-muscled Kenman, standing two steps away with his guardstick in hand.

"You must take us there," Belinda said firmly.

"Do even strangers subscribe to the libel that a mystic can never be trusted? I have not lied. I have told you the place."

Av shouldered forward. "You know this land, and we do not. We require your aid, as we would give you if you came to the mountains."

"I would not have come even this far inland except for the storm," Jacobee protested. "I am barely headed home, and you would have me turn on my heel."

"Why, how far is the bay of shoals?" Andor asked.

He pointed southwest through the trees. "A hard run of less than half a day. You cannot fail to find it."

Kenman stepped forward and brought the guardstick up to the low ready position. "We have come a long way and paid with two lives for our senior's curiosity. You will take us to this place, and then we will ask nothing more from you."

Jacobee looked to the point of the guardstick and back to Kenman's determined face.

"Aye," he said. "I believe I will."

• • •

For the first time since leaving the homehill, the Lonega broke into a runner's pace.

Jacobee led, with Kenman at his heels. Swallowing the humiliation of his helplessness, Andor accepted a punishing ride on Kern's back. The watcher's slight frame proved little enough a burden for the broad-shouldered provider that it was Belinda herself who set the limit on their speed. But she pressed herself to stay with the others, the anticipation that placed a glow in her eyes making her steps light.

The land lay heavy with water, both the swollen swamps and marshes that dominated the open land and the puddled leavings of the storm that dotted the woods. They made many small detours around water shallow enough to cross, which Kenman questioned until Jacobee pointed out the sinuous form of a water snake in one of the small ponds.

"One-bite-death," he said, the reptile's name explanation enough.

As they neared the lake-of-the-horizon, the smell of the land changed, the breeze bringing them the scent of salt and putrefaction. Then suddenly, through a gap in the trees and across an expanse of marsh, they could see the greenish blue hue and undulating surface of the bay. The last thousand strides were taken at a breakneck pace, and when the party reached the small shell-littered

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beach, Belinda was in the lead.

"It is truly is the lake of the horizon," she exclaimed. She ran to the waterline and squinted into the distance as small swells broke in front of her. The water melded into the sky at the horizon, a faraway haze masking any seam. "I can see nothing of the other side."

"Some say there is no other side," said Andor as he was lowered to the sand beside her.

"But where is the nightfire?" Kenman asked.

Shocked out of her awe by the question, Belinda's gaze swept both ways along the curving shoreline. The surface of the bay was unbroken by shoal, or *damikan,* or nightfire.

"It is gone. I feared this. The storm—" Jacobee said hoarsely as the first questioning gazes turned his way. "The stormwave comes taller than a man. Perhaps without *palan,* the *damikan* could not stand against it."

"You have no doubt this is the place?" Kenman asked.

"I slept on this beach for ten days."

"Could the stormwave change the beach so that you would not know it?" asked Kenman, indicating the downed trees and debris lying just inland.

Jacobee pointed east along the shoreline. "The beach *is* changed. But there is the inlet that feeds the black marsh," he said, and swung his arm to point west. "And there is Decision Point, which marks the edge of the dead land. *This* is where the *damikan* was."

Av took a menacing step toward the mystic. "Or perhaps you brought us to the wrong place. Perhaps your scare talk about the dead land is meant only to hide the *damikan's* true resting place."

"No!" Jacobee insisted, backing away and holding his hands up defensively. "I swear by my father, it was here!"

"Liar," snarled Av, and would have flung himself on the mystic if Kenman had not intervened.

"Stop!" he said forcefully, and with a gesture invited the runner to look behind himself.

There Belinda knelt, silently crying, fat tears falling from her cheeks to pit the sand. Beside her Andor sat stunned, his face slack, his eyes vacant. As Av watched, the tongue of a larger wave crawled up the beach and swirled around them, and they seemed not to notice.

Av turned back to Kenman and the mystic. "I do not want to think it ends this way."

"But it does," Kenman said firmly, and turned to Jacobee. "You have done what we asked — now you can go. We have no further need of you."

Jacobee nodded and began to retreat cautiously, backpedaling with his eyes fixed on Kenman's weapon. When he was beyond throwing range, he turned and ran, his shawl flying

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out behind him as he disappeared down the curving beach.

Kenman walked back to where Belinda still knelt, and offered a hand. She grasped it mechanically, allowing him to help her to her feet.

"Now we go home, and make things as they were," he said, and this time there was no argument.

Andor died quietly that night, lying on a bed of soft grass on the edge of the run. Though his passing surprised no one, it nonetheless affected Belinda profoundly. From the first moment his death was discovered the next morning, she sat cross-legged beside his body and rocked back and forth, alternately crying and softly singing in a voice made husky by grief.

She heard them talking about her in worried tones:

"Something has happened—"

"She never cried over her own children—"

"I am afraid for her—"

"I am afraid for us—"

But the words were sounds without meaning in her ears. She heard only an inner voice, a voice curiously calm, drained of feeling.

Even such as you, my teacher, becomes food for the 'kennies. And the sights you have seen and the things you have known will be washed away as dust in the rain.

I would take you inside me and give you life again, but I am dry, barren. And you would be trapped there and die with me, having lived a second life without meaning.

When Av came and touched her shoulder consolingly, she angrily shook off the contact.

After that, they left her alone until their impatience to be moving on was too great. Kenman approached her, crouching where he could see her face, though she did not look up or seem to note his presence.

"Belinda Twelvenames — do you want to hold Andor's remembrance here or at the homehill?"

She ran her fingers slowly, tenderly, along Andor's cheek, then stood. "There is no point to either," she said, and headed off down the run.

"What of Andor's body?" he called after her.

"Leave it," she answered lightly. "It does not matter." She did not look back to see the horrified expressions that heresy begat.

That day and those that followed, Belinda was tireless. As long as the sun or the moon lit the way, she kept on, stopping only as taboo demanded when both were absent from the sky.

Belinda stayed within herself throughout the journey. In the beginning, when they spoke to her directly she would not answer, but she at least acknowledged them with her eyes. Often, when they stopped for meals, she would sit and listen alertly

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to their conversations, though never taking part herself.

It's as if we were travelers unable to understand each other, but who have taken each other's company for a time, Av thought as he watched her.

But as they reached the rolling hills south of the known land, even those small concessions to their presence were fading. By the time they reached the first range of the Georgias, she was treating them as though they were not there at all.

Not even the reappearance of the nightfire overhead could stir her. When its passing brightened the sky as they rounded the end of Christiana Lake, she stopped and raised her head to watch it arc over them. But she said nothing, her face showed nothing, and when the nightfire was gone she continued on as before.

By the time they reached the homehill, there was no longer any doubt: Belinda was deep in the silence. Brushing off the embrace of her daughter Bria, dead to the welcoming cries and joyful faces, she headed directly for her cupa.

But as she neared it, Alice-Tonda-Ken appeared at the smoke hole, ascending the ladder and stepping off to block Belinda's path.

"So you have come back," she said challengingly, crossing her arms over her chest.

Belinda stopped an arm's length away and met her eyes, but gave no answer.

"Where is Andor?" Alice continued, looking past Belinda. "Has he died yet?"

The question told the travelers that Denis had made it home. "He has, Alice," Kenman called.

It was Ledell who spoke next, appearing out of the darkness off to the right. "You will use the name of respect when you speak with the senior. She is Alice-Tonda-Ken-Marla-Zi, newly delivered of a fertile daughter and a strong son. Like the seat of leadership, the magic of twinning has passed to her."

"I celebrate the births with you," Kenman said. "But Belinda Twelvenames is senior of the Lonega."

"No," Alice said sharply. "Twelvenames or not, she is no longer senior. She gave that up when she placed herself above the family. She gave that up when she took from us a fine breeder and the first among our watchers. She gave that up when she held lightly the lives of her husbands and took them on a foolish journey into a place of death." An unpleasant smile tugging at the corner of her mouth, Alice looked expectantly at Belinda for her reaction.

The smile faded when she saw no reaction at all. "I have decided to allow you to stay with us," Alice continued with a degree less confidence. "You can keep your place in the cupa, and you will be called first breeder because of your songs and magic." She leaned closer. "But I will hear

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you acknowledge me, or I will send you away, and you will have no place here."

"No!" Av cried. His protest was echoed by some of the family who looked on, hinting that conflict had ruled the homehill since they had left. "This is Ledell's doing. He has had a month to fill her head with his ambitions. You are senior, Belinda! She has no claim to it."

Belinda raised her head slowly and met Alice's gaze with a chilling empty-eyed stare. "I am not a Twelvenames," she said with an effort. "I am just Belinda. And you are senior of the Lonega." Then she ducked her head again and stepped past Alice to enter the cupa.

Shaking a fist angrily in the direction of Ledell, Av quickly followed her down the ladder.

"Belinda, what is wrong? Why allow this? The right is yours, not hers. Why let her take advantage?"

She turned to him, and for the first time in days there was emotion on her face: the emotion was relief. To his surprise, she reached for his hand. "It is all right, good husband."

Her response enouraged him. "Belinda, we will fight this. The Lonega will not prosper under her. Only ask, and you know we will stand with you."

"It is not a thing worth fighting over," she said softly, and would say no more. But inside, she was calling out to her daughter, joining hands with her. *Alice has freed me,* she exulted. *Now we are ready. We will slip into silence together, the silence that none can disturb. You will not have to go alone, sweet Kirsta. We go together.*

With the next dayrise, the family began to learn that a breeder deep in silence is a disturbing presence. Talk stopped at Belinda's approach, and the sight of her deathly face turned heads away and banished smiles. As though paying her back for being cold to them, some of the youngest took cruel pleasure in pinching her arms and legs until purple bruises appeared.

But Belinda took no meals with them, spent long hours in the cupa, and only rarely emerged to sit in the sky circle or walk the homehill with leaden steps. That pattern minimized the disturbance, and for several days Alice tolerated Belinda's behavior.

Before long, however, driven by her own insecurities, Alice's attitude began to harden. Each sight of Belinda became a reminder, then an accusation. She followed Belinda on her walks so that she could taunt her at every step, reminding Belinda of her barren loins and dry breasts, inviting her to drown herself in the deep pool downstream from the bridge. And to none of this did Belinda react, not even to an open-palm blow that left a livid handprint on her cheek for the rest of the day.

The next day Alice added Denis to

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her stable of husbands in a sky circle ceremony at which the joy was more forced than real. But even that drew no reaction from Belinda, though Kenman had to be restrained from taking after Denis for his disloyalty.

Av marked all this with sadness and wondered how long Alice would allow it to continue. *You make it impossible for her to enjoy her victory,* he thought as he sat beside Belinda's sleeping form in the cupa, *because your serenity denies it.*

Before that phase was over, Alice confronted Belinda publicly as she sat at the edge of the sky circle. "You are almost dead, Belinda Twelvenames," said Alice with all the cruelty she could muster. "The dead do not sleep in cupas or walk the homehill. Go and find yourself a resting place."

When Belinda did not look up, Alice shoved her with her foot and sent her sprawling. "Do you hear me?" she screamed. "Leave us! Take your silence and your deathface away from here! I expel you! You are no longer Lonega."

Belinda gathered herself slowly and came to her feet. *Fight back!* Av pleaded silently as he looked on. *How can you let her humiliate you this way! Belinda Twelvenames! Known to all the Georgias! Oh, Belinda, find yourself!*

But neither Alice's excoriations nor Av's exhortations registered on Belinda, and she moved off toward the north with head bowed. As she did, a victorious smirk spread across Alice's face.

Av looked helplessly at Kenman. "It's better this way," the guardian said, shaking his head, then turned his back to avoid Av's eyes. Av looked to Kern, who only shrugged impotently and walked away.

He ran after Alice and caught her roughly by the arm. "You are sending away the good heart of the Lonega," he said fiercely. "This family will die with you as senior."

Alice jerked her arm free and glared at him. "Then you should be happy to leave now, too," she hissed. "I expel you as well. I have no need for those with your loyalties."

Only a lifetime of conditioning that breeders were to be valued beyond measure kept Av from striking her down at that moment. But she saw the hate in his eyes, and he the momentary fear in hers, before he turned away to follow Belinda away from what had been their home.

She led him wordlessly to the high observatory, where she curled up in the dust of the marking circle and closed her eyes. He settled near her, and drew shapes in the dust with a fingertip until it was too dark to see their outline. He expected her to die that night, just as Andor had died when he lost whatever hope or purpose the fallen nightfire had given him. When the nightfire appeared

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over the north horizon just after nightset, Av regarded it with undisguised antipathy.

I know you now, better than Ledell, better than Andor, he thought. *You are the bringer of death. You are the maker of miseries.*

But Belinda surprised him. Though he failed in his effort to watch her throughout the night, when he awoke at dayrise she was still breathing. On rising, she brushed her hair when he offered her his bristlestick, and washed herself when he brought her water. But she would not eat, and she would not talk.

That did not stop Av from talking to her. Much of the time she was awake, he would sit near her and quietly recount things he had seen while running, or recollections of Belinda's children. He asked her no questions, and never raised his voice or showed impatience. It was the vigil of one friend resigned to the death of another.

Each day she slept later, and was more listless when she arose. And yet she lingered, through a day of showers and a night of fog, through two passings of the nightfire just three days apart, through the remainder of the food Av had had in his pouch when he left the homehill.

"Even if you will not, I must eat," he said one morning, standing over her. "I will be away no longer than is necessary."

When he returned, he found her seated cross-legged on the edge of the circle, turning an egg-sized stone over and over in her hand.

"Look, Belinda — I found snapberries," he said as a mother might coax a contrary child. Loosing his pouch from his belt, he placed it before her.

At that moment, a rumbling sound like a long, rolling peal of thunder turned Av on his heel to stare into the cloudless northern sky. There, trailing a lacy white plume and sparkling like sun on the water, something was falling to earth.

"Belinda!" he shouted, afraid to take his eye from it. "Do you see? The second nightfire is coming down!"

As he watched, the apparition underwent a puzzling transformation. Its smooth ballistic arc was interrupted, and the thing itself seemed to grow. When the transformation was complete, the nightfire was not falling but floating, descending gracefully under three inverted red and white bowls, and joined to them by fine strands that glittered like a bedewed web.

"Look at it, Belinda, look at it!" he cried, locking his gaze on the strange shape. When it at last disappeared over a ridge to the northeast, he fixed in his memory the place it was last visible.

Then he turned to Belinda, and his heart leaped. She had come to her feet, and was staring at the northeast hills. Slowly, as though it were an un-

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practiced movement, she looked to Av, and he saw eyes that once again harbored life.

"I know where it fell," he said tentatively, hopefully. "I know we could find it — if you wanted to."

With painful slowness, she brought her hands to her cheeks, which were flushed with new color. "Yes," she said, her voice a croak. She held out a hand to him. "Yes, good husband. Take me there."

Av wanted to rock the mountain with his shout of joy, and catch her up in his arms in a crushing embrace. But fear that he would frighten her back to the place she had only just escaped stayed him. Instead, his right hand went up, and she mirrored his action. Their fingers entwined, and he stepped close to lightly press his cheek against hers.

"I have missed you, Belinda."

She answered him with only a wistful smile and a nod. But he understood that that was all he could expect for the moment, and together they started off down the northeast slope of the high observatory toward their goal.

Belinda's stamina astonished Av as much as her convalescence delighted him. After not having eaten for nearly two phases, she downed a quantity of snapberries that would have knotted ted Av's stomach in the same circumstance. She held her head high and pressed close enough to Av's heels to step on them more than once.

But she was still not whole. It seemed to Av that she was fighting to escape the silence, casting about for the understandings that would tear down the walls she had been building. Her self-explanations were the tools of that struggle, tools she reached out to share with Av, as though by doing so she ensured she would not have to fight alone.

Yet the first effort had to be hers. it was time for Belinda to talk, and Av to listen. And though her utterances spanned half a day, they were a single continuum of thought.

"I cannot see Kirsta anymore. This was not enough for her, any more than the first time. She came with us on hope alone.

"If I were a maker, I might have understood sooner — but if I were a maker, I might never have thought on it. A maker's works outlive him. He leaves the family enriched by the exercise of his craft, and that purpose never leaves him.

"Breeding is the most special kind of making, and brings the fullest sense of purpose. But there is a price, a terrible price. Unlike any other, a breeder may outlive her craft. A breeder past blood-end is a breeder in name only. That which sustained her, absorbed her, is gone.

"If the works of a maker are lost, he still has the craft in his hands to replace them. If the quarry of a provider escapes, he still has his weapon.

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If a young breeder loses a child, as I lost Dette and Madee, she still has her husbands and the floor of the cupa. But when I lost Erik, and Kjit, and Garivan, and Kirsta, I could do nothing.

"The loss of my craft and the death of my children emptied me.

"When I saw the first nightfire fall, I had purpose again. To see it, to know its nature, to take its measure — that filled the emptiness. But when I lost that purpose I was emptier than before. I lost more than my purpose on the shore of the lake-of-the-horizon. I lost hope.

"That is when the silence takes you.

"I know why the families are struggling, why the Ellijay are gone. If tomorrow is just to be an echo of today, then there is no reason for tomorrow, and no purpose for today. Death is preferable to a life that leads nowhere.

"The purpose of today is to shape tomorrow, not to repeat yesterday."

Though heartened by the sound of her voice, what Av heard did not banish his one fear. He waited until they were nearing their destination, with Belinda's reintegration largely complete, to voice it.

"Belinda, if what we find is not what you expect — or we find nothing at all, like before — will I lose you again?"

"No, good husband," she said with a reassuring smile and a squeeze of his hand. "I already know that it will not be what I expect. This time, it is not the finding but the searching that recalled me. I needed a focus to bring me back from self-chosen death. But when it is gone, I will find another. I know how to fill the emptiness now."

From the top of the ridge beyond which the nightfire had disappeared, they spotted the splash of red and white that marked where it had fallen. With his keener sight, Av also thought he saw movement, movement that would mean they were not the first to arrive.

"Perhaps the Gaddis saw it as well," Av said as they began to pick their way down into the valley. "They were closer than we."

But by the time they reached the site, the others, whoever they had been, were gone, taking with them two of the three red and white smoothweave bowls. The third was entangled in the crown of a tree, its glittering ropes dangling and dancing in the gentle breeze.

The nightfire itself did not glitter, or glow, or burn. It rested at an angle at the edge of the glade, a teetering white monument streaked with black. A broad, shallow gouge across the ground and a litter of broken branches betrayed the path and force of its landing.

It was too tall for even the long-limbed runner to reach up to its top, where the ragged stubs of the glitter

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ropes were attached, and far too large for even the two of them to join hands around its girth. Av circled it cautiously, then came to where Belinda stood studying the lines, ridges, and shapes arrayed on its surface.

"How could this be the nightfire?" he demanded. "How could this light the sky so?"

Belinda reached out and touched its surface, and found it hot where the sun shone on it, cool in the shadow, everywhere smooth to the touch. She ran her fingers across one of the black streaks, and wrinkled her nose at the smell it left on her fingers. She struck it with a rock, and saw it dent under the blow.

"It is a *made* thing," Av realized belatedly.

Belinda nodded excitedly. "Yes — a made thing that once kept company with the stars."

"How can that be?" Av demanded, almost angrily.

She breathed heavily, and took a long time answering. "Somewhere there are makers of such skill as we have never seen, makers who work in smooth weave and shinestone and place lights among the stars," she said finally, running her fingers lightly over a pattern of red markings on the side of the nightfire.

"Where?" Av asked. "I have traveled more than any other Lonega, and I have never seen nor heard of such makers. And if it is a made thing, what is its use? What does it do?"

Her eyes found and fingertip traced a drawing of the nightfire and of a man — a guardian or provider, from the shape — standing beside it. There was an outline of a hand, and she placed her own against it. The engraved hand grasped a recessed catch and squeezed it. Belinda's hand did the same.

There was a hissing sound, and the nightfire shuddered. A crack appeared across its face and up its side, widening to a handbreadth as the hissing ceased.

"Help me," she said, and took hold of one edge of the door. Tugging together, they swung it back until light streamed into the opening.

The light lit a grid of a hundred small rectangles, each barely a handbreadth wide, each colored one of a hundred different pale hues and tints. From each of the rectangles dangled a small loop of shinestone. A single rectangle, at the center of the grid, was a brilliant scarlet red.

With barely a moment's hesitation, Belinda grasped the loop of the red rectangle and pulled. It moved — and more appeared behind it. She pulled again, and still more appeared. A third tug, and a piece of the nightfire came off in her hands, swung downward, fell open, and disgorged more than a hundred objects unlike anything either had ever seen.

Belinda cast the container aside and picked up one of the objects. It seemed to be some kind of smooth-

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weave, though made stiff somehow. One side was a white square marred by black markings that reminded Belinda of Andor's watching records.

The other side was a revelation — a magic hole through which she saw the lake-of-the-horizon, and on it a long white shape the nature of which she could not divine. But the waves of the lake-of-the-horizon were frozen, without motion, and dry to her touch.

"They are too real to be drawings, but less real than the world," she exclaimed.

Av crouched with her and sifted through the pictures, noting that each bore a small colored disk in one corner of the back. There was one larger object in the pile but it was nothing more than a number of the smaller ones fastened together.

Suddenly Av grabbed a picture from the pile and thrust it before Belinda's face. "This is the downstream wall of the lake at Hartwell," he said in amazement. "I know where I would stand to see this."

Belinda cocked her head to one side. "They are something like memories, I think — as though you could hold one in your hand and see what you saw when you were there—"

"But where would you stand to see these?" he asked, taking in with a sweep of his hand a footprint in the dust of the Sea of Tranquility, a turtle-backed bridge arching across the Lower Bay of the Hudson, and a line of silver transmission towers bisecting a field of young corn.

"I cannot imagine," Belinda said.

Av picked out a memory of the Gossamer Condor in flight and marked the pale blue circle of color on the back. Taking it to the open door of the nightfire — the name seemed most inappropriate by then, but he had no other — he compared it to the color of each of the drawers in turn.

"Look — these are the same," he said, pulling the drawer open and dumping its contents, a hundred memories of the shapes of flight, onto the ground. "And inside there are more. Every one of these must be full of them. But can these be memories, or are they dreams?"

Belinda did not answer. She had picked up the book of memories and turned back its cover, where she found a loose white sheet with more markings. The markings said:

From the desk of . . . DANIEL YATES

To the survivors—

If you are ill and hoped for medicine, or hungry and hoped for food, there is nothing here for you. Even in my time, millions needed both, and yet life went on. Because, for a time at least, we had something you may need: hope.

Consciously or not, you already know the worst we were capable of. I offer you here reminders of the best. I have no way to teach you

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how to do what these photographs show. It will have to be enough that you know they can be done.

But to Belinda the markings were meaningless, and she cast the paper aside. A minor gust of wind lifted it and blew it into the brush, where it would remain until the next rainstorm would destroy both its form and its content.

Belinda turned her attention to the book's contents. The first memory showed a tall breeder standing between two skeletal shinestone shapes that reminded Belinda of the nightfire. Successive memories showed more skeletons, and in each they more closely resembled the object resting a few steps away from Belinda and Av. In every memory there were men, but their builds were covered by clothing and she could not otherwise decide their crafts.

Then she found a memory that showed the nightfire itself much as it stood before her, save for the dangling cut ends of the ropes and the fragrant streaks of black.

Still further into the book was a memory of a sad-faced young runner holding in his arms a container like the ones she and Av had pulled from the nightfire. In the next she saw vast numbers of memories being neatly stacked by oddly dressed breeders—

Belinda quickly turned back to the beginning and stared at the face of the tall breeder. Then she flipped forward a few pages, studying the skeletal nightfire that appeared on each — then back to the beginning, and forward again even faster.

They are not different *skeletons — they are the* same! *One becomes the other—*

Closing the book, she clutched it to her chest. "Av — I understand now. Oh, Av! *We* were the makers!"

He only stared, uncomprehending.

"Don't you see, in a time *before* the darkness — oh, here is purpose enough for a hundred lifetimes, not only for one old breeder but for all the Georgias!"

Still he stared, nose wrinkled in puzzlement.

"Dear Av," she said, reaching out to touch his cheek. "Do not wonder, and do not be afraid, of me or for me. I understand but a piece of it myself, but we will understand everything in time. Now, gather as many memories as you can carry! We are going back to the Lonega — to my homehill, where I am senior.

"And when we have put things in order there, we will share these memories with the Gaddis, and the Cantona, and the mystics on the shore of the lake-of-the-horizon," she exulted, radiant. "We will put thoughts in their heads that have never been there before."

And in the heat of that vision began the first thaw of spring.

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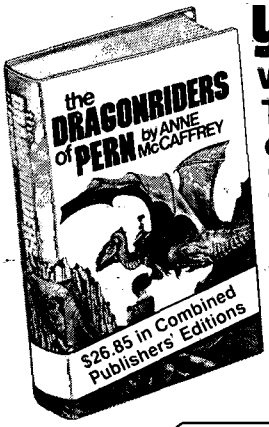

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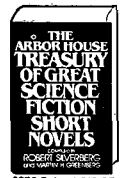

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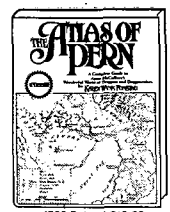

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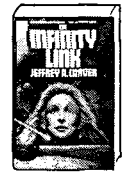

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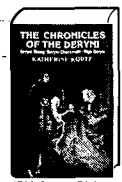

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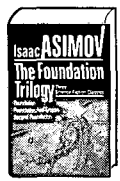

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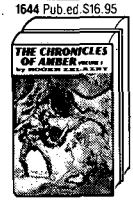

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